

Aliens Ain't Shit (I could probably beat them up)

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by [Coldbluesilk](#)

Summary

“Max,” he enunciated, planting a hand over his chest with a thump, “Max.”

The next line of surprised nonsense had something that could be interpreted as ‘mack-suh’ tacked on to the end, but the man had mirrored the gesture.

“No! I’m Max,” he reached out and grabbed the man’s hand this time, pressing it against his chest, “My name is Max, you dumb fuck.”

The man stared at his hand, then at Max, and eventually a single syllable fell out of his mouth: “Max.”

Holy shit.

Max has been abducted by aliens. After being passed from ship to ship, he meets another human.

Alternatively, David is not actually a human. He has no idea what to do with this strange, violent being he's been put in charge of.

Prologue

When Max ran away from home, he expected to get at least *somewhat* far.

Maybe a town away. Hell, a whole state. He could even make it into Canada if all went well. Whatever got him far, and across as many disagreeing jurisdictions as possible. All he needed was to get out of that goddamn house or die trying. That plan, without even having to say so, never had the scope of leaving Earth— much less the entire fucking galaxy. Because aliens weren't supposed to be real- or even if they were, didn't seem to give a flying fuck about humanity.

If anyone was still looking for him. Anyone at all. The trail would've gone dark in the nowhere town of Sleepy Peak.

It was just supposed to be a layover. He'd taken a city bus out as far as it went with the spare money he'd stolen and scrounged from odd jobs. Then got on the next one. And the next. Winks of sleep came here and there, but he had too much to lose to get caught unaware until he got really into the sticks. He wasn't even an idiot about it! Max was rotating his shirts to make himself harder to identify. When he could, he kept his hoodie drawn and his demeanor completely forgettable to the apathetic passersby.

By the time he was in Sleepy Peak, he was the only one left on the bus aside from the driver. Once it got into the town formally, it would turn around. Max managed to negotiate just a little further. The old man looked at him strangely, and even clarified with him if this was the place he was intended to go, and Max dissuaded his suspicion with a polite nod and the excuse of a summer camp.

That, as it turned out, had been the wrong thing to say. Sleepy Peak, for such a lacklustre place, actually had multiple summer camps. When asked for clarification, Max just shrugged and said it was a nature camp and he'd figure it out if he was dropped nearby.

"That one?" The man asked, glancing at him from the mirror, "Wasn't it shut down after it was unveiled as some big money laundering fraud?"

Max chewed his cheek. Either risk real people checking his backstory or just get dropped off at a place that doesn't exist anymore. "It's under new management, I think. They're doing a lot of scrambling to get the place usable so my admission was late."

"If you say so."

He was let out on a gravel road that bordered nothing but trees in either direction. The guy didn't even want to go down the washed out driveway that led into the camp for fear of getting stuck and having to find a tow truck that far out. It didn't really matter because Max had no intention of trying to go down there and get eaten by an animal. Maybe he'd come back if he needed to squat somewhere, but Max had seen enough horror movies to know to stay the fuck away from an eerie as shit abandoned summer camp.

In hindsight, he actually would have been better off there, but instead, Max took one look at the setting sun and just started walking.

The bus may have stopped, but he wouldn't. That had been the last one of the day, and he had nowhere to go until the next one in the morning. Either he'd find a remotely safe looking car to hitchhike with, or he'd make it to the bus terminal the next town over. Yes, he could feel tingling nerves and waves of paranoia telling him that this topped the list of bad ideas, but Max had been in fight or flight so long that he really didn't have it in him to stop and have a complete breakdown at the side of the road. At some point, he really was just too emotionally and physically drained to care. Shit happened. He just had to keep putting one foot in front of the other and do the one thing he was good at: Surviving.

The lights came after dark.

Max hadn't seen a single car on the road. Not one.

They weren't the average set of headlights, and they sure as hell weren't shooting stars with how overcast the day had been.

"...The fuck?" he asked no one in particular, voice scratchy from exhaustion and dehydration in equal parts. A warm gust of wind blew his way and amidst the fresh air and pine, Max smelled ozone.

Hopefully it was just some fucked up noiseless airplane. Or some dumbass tech startup testing out drones. All he could make out were dots, shifting and moving, but generally keeping in alignment. They probably couldn't see him, and even if they did, he must have looked creepy walking in the dark like that, so hopefully no one would bother him. A sleepy kid in Sleepy Peak wasn't anyone's top priority,

The lights got bigger.

Illumination spilled so easily that he could see further down the road, now. Hear every crunch of his sneakers on the gravel since all the animals had gone quiet. The bullfrogs and crickets wanted nothing to do with this, and he was inclined to agree. With every second, the dots grew, coming closer to the point where Max halted his movement and squinted in his bleary stupor.

That was something to hide from, he decided. The thought had barely executed in his exhausted mind when a spotlight as bright as the fucking sun landed on him.

"Shit!" he hissed, hands flying up to cover some of the blinding glare. Being flashbanged out of nowhere was as jarring as it was disorienting, and there was no way in hell that this was going to be a pleasant interaction, no matter who it was.

Yeah, fuck that noise.

His first instinct was to duck and run, but Max was caught off guard to discover that he couldn't. Like a nightmare, it kept him fixed in place and rendered his efforts useless. Just as he tried again, the weight of his body shifted strangely. The entire thing felt off and wholly

wrong in a way that had his hair standing on end. It took him a solid, incredulous second to realize he was slowly being relinquished from gravity. That feeling was pressure being taken off his joints, muscles and bones. His backpack even lifted from his shoulders.

“Wha-” He blinked, feeling his feet leave the ground, “Oh, fuck. Okay- Shit!”

Helicopters couldn’t do that last time he checked. Nothing could, actually. The whole night felt a little dissociative with all he had going on, but being lifted into the air was too much, even for him. As Max struggled, his sharp breaths were the loudest thing on the empty road. Everything was too bright. Too foreign. Max would have thought he was being fucking raptured if it weren’t for the fact that he didn’t believe in god. Nothing made sense, but that couldn’t change the fact that it was still fucking happening to him-

“What the fuck!” he hollered, at least two metres from the ground and climbing. He still couldn’t see much through the blinding light, but he hoped whoever was piloting it could hear him, “Motherfucker- Put me down!”

There came no response, and his increasingly scrambled brain decided only the government would have the bullshit money required for a fucking tractor beam of all things, “I’m an American fucking citizen, asshole! Shouldn’t you be doing this shit in Area-51?”

Nothing. And the pull was speeding up.

Saving his breath, Max shielded his eyes as much as possible and tried to see his abductor better. The cold unnatural light made that next to impossible, but the more he looked, the more it seemed like the night sky warped unnaturally above him. In the toss-up between *‘rip in spacetime’* and *‘billion dollar cloaking technology’*, Max picked the latter and primed himself for confrontation, or getting shot in the head, or literally anything else that happened when the American government abducted brown kids off the street.

Being dropped at this height would probably be terminal. If whatever freaky tech shit let him go now, Max became scavenger food. It was no use flailing in place anymore if he was that fucked.

The view of treetops and Lake Lilac was all too quickly replaced with all-encompassing white light and Max knew he’d reached the source. All he could do was ward away the pain by shielding his eyes and ducking low. The feeling of disorientation increased, and something in his instincts didn’t like not knowing which way was down. Sensory deprivation made him particularly aware of the hammer of his heart and the smell of ozone that had been steadily increasing since his ascent.

Something pneumatic hissed shut below him. The first sound given by the strange craft.

In the next instant, the light was off. The pink shade of lumens seeping through his fingers was traded for comparative darkness. Max didn’t even have the time to open his eyes before gravity seemed to heave back to normal and sent him squeezing them shut again.

“*Fuck!*”

Instead of dying on that nowhere road, Max hit a metallic surface with a pained noise. He was on the floor almost as soon as he realized he was falling, so it couldn't have been that far. Dull pain radiated up his shoulder, but thankfully he didn't smack his head. He had to blink to clear his vision, letting his eyes adjust to a more sane level of brightness and-

He was in a fucking cage.

A box?

Whatever the semantics were, he barely had room to stand in the cube of frosted glass he found himself inside. It still let light in, enough so to recognize thin lines inside the material (possibly reinforcement?) that seemed to pulse every now and then. The floor was smooth and vaguely cold, and the once fresh air from outside now held an off note. That particular detail concerned him because there didn't seem to be any visible air holes outside of what looked like a shower drain on the ceiling.

"Hello?" Max called, beating a fist against the glass a few times, "Anyone wanna fucking tell me what's going on?"

Anything outside the box sounded muffled and unintelligible, but he made sure to glare at the vague shadows he could make out. There *were* noises, though. Someone was there.

"You hear me?" Max snapped, letting the barrier between them work up his nerves, "I don't know what the fuck this is supposed to be, but you picked the wrong fucking kid!" Every second they ignored him was just another heap of conclusions he could jump to. The chemical smell seeping into the box was beginning to make his head hurt and there were a million and one reasons why that was *not* a good sign for him. Mostly because the CIA didn't need nearly this much fanfare to kill one kid. Or anyone, for that matter. Either Lockheed Martin just got a lot better at not bragging about their superior technology, or Max was a little more fucked than he wanted to think about.

He took a steadying breath and- wow, damn that had a little kick to it. Maybe he should hold off on more of those for now. Which meant no more yelling. Fuck.

Okay, maybe this screamed aliens.

Which was fucking stupid, but increasingly probable. As far as Max knew, aliens only became relevant to Earth whenever big agencies wanted to cover something up. Something like, he didn't know, snatching children from the middle of nowhere with technology they weren't supposed to have? If he were watching this on TV, he'd be able to call bullshit immediately, but-

Now Max really needed to breathe. His vision was getting weird.

The pressure in his lungs grew to something unignorable, and the bodily reflex of ‘*stop suffocating yourself you idiot*’ kicked in hard enough to make him break and steal a shambling gasp. It tasted fucking sour, hitting somewhere deep in his nose like gasoline and it sure as hell didn’t chase away the spots gathering in his vision. If anything, all of it just got worse. The pulse of pain in his head grew to match every breath, and Max could do nothing but sink against the frosted wall once his balance was compromised.

“Not... good...” he rasped, before promptly passing the fuck out.

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It was no surprise that he felt like shit when he woke up. Saying he ‘woke up’ felt a little too gentle for jolting into consciousness with a shout and having to immediately lower his head back down when a wave of pain and nausea greeted him. A protesting shoulder, cottonmouth and that strange lingering headache greeted him when he came to. Max was more surprised he woke up *at all*.

“Ow.”

Blinking his eyes open, Max realized he was somewhere else. In the time he’d been out, his captors had moved him. Instead of a box, he’d been upgraded to something more akin to a jail cell. The white room remained largely unfurnished, but he could recognize a few things despite the weird... engineering. There was a thinly stuffed rectangle on the ground he was going to assume was supposed to be a bed, a partition with no other purpose than to obscure... yeah that was a squat toilet if he’d ever seen one, and more of that foggy reinforced glass as a sad excuse for a window.

“Delightful,” his voice sounded like sandpaper, but hearing himself speak out loud felt strangely grounding. That, and the backpack around his shoulders reminded him of his reality.

Damn, the universe had to fuck him over one last time, huh?

His shining reward for taking charge of his own life was being kidnapped, knocked out, and put in a cell. Was it telling that he didn’t think of crying for his parents? The police? Anyone? The only thing that made water prick his eyes was his own disappointment and frustration. Because of course begging, borrowing and stealing would only land him under a new oppressor. This time, he might not get lucky. All of that, and he was just going to die here—because Max was a realist. And in *real life* no one came looking for kids like him. Not in time, anyway.

He finally got the wherewithal to drag himself into sitting upright after a while. Standing felt like a lot right now, so he kept his legs crossed and glared in the general direction of his foggy window again like a bad CSI show.

Except the window was suddenly a lot less transparent now.

“Jesus fucking christ!”

What looked back at him either had to be some demented CGI artist’s version of a prank or an actual fucking alien. The eyes that met his own were yellow and slitted like a reptile, but the rest of the ‘face’ was entirely fish. Like they somehow managed to give a northern pike hormonal acne and a bright red waddle on its head to boot. The thing was so ugly that it actually reminded him of a shithead teen who gave him a black eye once in school.

“Give a kid some warnings before you show something like that!” he snapped, a cocktail of bitterness and adrenaline sharpening his tongue for him. Speaking hurt but some things had to be known.

The abomination’s mouth moved, throat shifting beneath the khaki collar of the strange clothing it had on, but no sound made it to Max. He got the sense that it was talking *about* him instead of to him, tapping away at a holographic device in its reptilian hands and only three fingers. There came a clunky sound from the flat space of wall beside the window, and the alien - *because let’s be honest here, that was a fucking alien*- walked towards it.

All too quickly, a doorway hissed open where the wall was supposed to be. Without any barrier separating them, Max could see beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was built fucking wrong. That *thing* was now in there with him and Max could recognize a weapon when he saw it strapped to a backwards facing leg.

“Fuck,” why freak out at the existence of aliens when he could freak out at the more pertinent issue of one of them approaching him, “Alright, shit, that was mean-”

The alien managed to rattle out a lisping string of nonsense. That tablet(?) or whatever it was shot a flashlight at him, and Max felt his anger flare. The light was nothing compared to the tractor beam, so he could more or less just raise a hand to it and be completely fine.

“The fuck is that for, you asshat?”

The light turned off, and the alien seemed to take a few notes. All it did was add to his mounting confusion. He didn’t even have the time to think of another remark before the damn thing got a weird look in its eye and fucking *lunged*.

“Shit!” he blinked at it with wide eyes as the alien took a step back again and made a strange, gargling laugh at his expense.

Okay, that guy was just an asshole trying to scare him for kicks. Sue him if he tensed, alright? He didn’t want to be involved with that much ugly. And besides, considering the alien wrote something else down afterwards, it was probably a test. Maybe they were making sure Max was still all there in the head? He didn’t know if he liked that idea. Mostly because he didn’t have a good track record when it came to any evaluation, educational or otherwise.

It turned to leave.

“Hey! Wait,” Max got to his feet, ignoring the way his body ached, “You’re seriously not going to explain anything?”

The alien wasn’t as tall as most adults he knew, but it certainly looked down at Max as it unholstered its weapon. Maybe the shape of a gun was more universal than people gave it credit for, because Max caught the gist of the next unintelligible string of noise it made without understanding a word.

He was being threatened.

“Alright! Fine,” he hissed back, “I don’t get to leave. Got it.”

Something in the alien’s gaze must not have trusted that sentiment, because the damn gun was trained on him until he was out the door and the wall was back to its seamless white. Max couldn’t entirely blame them. Because when- and not if, *when*, Max got a hold of whatever that was, he would be fucking shit up asap.

But that could come later. Max needed more information before he did anything profoundly stupid. Or, more frankly, *any* information. He didn’t even think aliens existed until today and he still wasn’t sold on it completely. Everything seemed too stupid and fake, but that didn’t get him out of the room or up his chances of living. The semantics around his abduction could be saved for explanation after he got out of there... wherever he was.

Regardless, the alien still reminded him of that shitty bully, so Max appropriately dubbed that one Edward Pikeman. It was a petty victory over someone probably doing much better than he was right now, but a victory nonetheless.

“I honestly can’t believe I still have my backpack,” he muttered, unzipping it.

The window had gone frosted again and the alien seemed happy enough to leave him unsupervised. That was fine. He was used to it. Either there was nothing he could do to help himself or he could figure something out. Hopefully, it was the latter. There was a reason that no teacher wanted him out of their immediate sight.

Okay, so cash and clothes didn’t do much for him there. While Max had enough brain cells to take a knife or two with him on the road, he just wasn’t sure what that would do when Pikeman had a motherfucking space gun. For all he knew, that shit would turn him inside out while he was still alive. Mr Honeynuts was decent moral support, but wouldn’t save them. At the very least, Max had a half-empty water bottle and two remaining granola bars. His prognosis was bleak.

“Well,” he addressed the bear, holding him under the arms to make proper eye contact, “I have a lumpy pillow and something to kill myself with.”

Max and all his things ended up lying on the rectangle in the corner of the room. It was only marginally softer than the floor, but something told him it was more than he should have expected anyway. As much as waiting for someone to come in and shoot him in the face was fun, it got pretty old after the first hour or so. Time wasn’t really a solid thing for him when

he had nothing to reference. Was he hungry? Yeah, but Max was always rationing food, so that hardly meant anything.

All that waiting eventually led to Pikeman again, but this time he brought company.

Two more short, one tall. *All* nightmare fuel. They poured into his little cell like a ghoulis parade and Max could easily tell that none of them were the same species.

“Have you heard of knocking?” Max was already in the corner, so his defensive position couldn’t really improve much, “And Christ, it smells like shit in here now. Which one of you did that?”

One of them- short and squat with rectangular eyes and round buck teeth made a low, nasally sound at him. Every bloated pore seemed to be slick with oil, and whatever appetite he once had was long gone now.

“Oh, so it was you,” Max said, keeping up the conversation if only to help fight the anxiety of the aliens closing in, “I’m gonna call you Fartz forever now. I hope you know that.”

Fartz didn’t seem to understand him and Max couldn’t spare him the time to figure it out when the tallest of them reached for him. Fucking hell it was like a naked mole rat got jacked on steroids. This one didn’t talk. Not even when Max ducked away from their sausage fingers and nearly ran into Pikeman. It just stared at him all beady eyed and then tried to do it again.

Thankful he’d put the pocketknife in his hoodie, Max unsheathed the blade and tried to look more menacing than he felt, “Alright, shitheads. Anyone who doesn’t want a new orifice can take a step back.”

Pikeman’s blaster was level with his face and Max tried not to feel the headrush of adrenaline that came with it. He smelled a bluff. After all the work of putting him in a longer-term cell, they seriously wouldn’t-

Something stuck him in the back.

Sharp. Thin. He felt skin break, and distantly, the knowledge that the needle had to go through two layers of cloth to get there. Max whipped around to look at the fourth and final alien. A cyclops and a snake had ugly sex and made whatever that was. It was the only one he hadn’t paid much attention to because it seemed the least interested in him, but lo and behold, there was an empty syringe dangling from its fingertips.

“Oh *fuck* this,” Max snarled, tightening his grip on the knife, “You’re first!”

Snake brandished the pointed needle at him, but Max was already seeing red. Despite their similar heights, Max was thinner and moved in too fast, digging his fingers into that scaly wrist and trying to stab him through the plating as the alien began to shout in alarm. Whatever that drug was, it was making quick work of his motor functions. Regardless, Max twisted the knife just enough to get past a few of the scales and draw forth deep blue blood before he was forcibly pried away.

He hissed when the tall one knocked him into the unforgiving metal wall, “Fuck! The element of surprise isn’t very fun, is it?”

They began trying to take his weapon, but Max held fast until he was shoved into the wall a second time. By then it was hard to keep his fingers tight around it. Or have any tension in his body at all for that matter, but stubborn willpower accounted for a lot. In order to take it from him, they had to grab his arm... which meant getting closer to the knife. It was inevitably pried from his fist, but not without more shallow scrapes along their arms to show for it. He got the message across.

Whatever terrible chatter that they produced meant nothing, but violence seemed to be a universal enough language to show that Max was the farthest thing from willing. He wound up being dragged out of the cell half limp from the drugs, but still mostly lucid from the adrenaline, snarling and cursing in slurred speech the whole time. And for good reason, too! Those motherfuckers hauled him into some lab room and stole like, a quart of blood from him! It took three tries to find the vein!

He wound up back in the cell exhausted, bleeding, and with some random MRE package thrown in after him. Max didn’t even have the energy to eat it; he just hauled himself to the bed and crashed until the drugs wore off. His first twenty-four hours had really set the tone for Max’s stay with that band of idiots, because things didn’t get much better from there.

First Contact

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Alrighty, Davey! You stand there and look menacing, eh? I know for a fact this woman smells fear.”

David raised his head with a tight smile as he took his post, “Yes sir, Mr Campbell.”

“Just like that! Already showing those teeth,” the captain said, giving him a hearty clap on the back with his broad grey paw.

Physical contact like that used to hurt quite a lot back when he was first settling into his new form, but that was over a decade ago now. Something about his whole body having to stretch, break, and reform in accordance with that DNA sample the scientists in Mr Campbell’s lab gave him really did make the first few years tough, though.

You see, David was more of a human occupationally than he was personally, but such was the way of his species.

David could feel eyes on him as soon as their guest came into sight.

Oh. Mr Campbell didn’t meet with many garden mothers. Their race was... Well, they didn’t usually like to make friends outside of their species. What an interest to see one branching out from her network.

Her vines curled upon eye contact. David couldn’t remember if that was a friendly sign or not.

He didn’t speak the language Mr Campbell used for transactions, but the word for human was fairly universal. It came up many times over the conversation, and David made a mental note not to visibly react each time it was said. The meetings usually moved subjects by now, but then again, such a rare and dangerous species turned a lot of heads for being a deathworlder.

Except... Did he mention that David’s home planet wasn’t Terra?

The meeting took up approximately one quarter of his memorized list of favourite trees (surprise! It was every tree he knew of), so David was pleased to note that it concluded quickly.

Mr Campbell signalled for David to follow them as they walked back to her shuttle, and as always, he waited until after their company was gone to address David openly, “Good news!”

To this, he brightened. Mr Campbell usually didn’t tell him what most of the meetings were about. “What is it?”

“You, Davey, have gotten such a good reputation for yourself that we can afford to get a new addition to our crew and your inner circle!”

David’s “Inner circle” was made up of people allowed to know his secret. Humans weren’t supposed to talk, per se, just shout a lot of nonsense and war calls that their species could produce. What they had in strength and tactical intelligence, humans sadly lost in sapience. Talking things over wasn’t in their nature, so being seen doing it was a bad idea for his cover.

Right now, his safe list consisted of his best friend Gwen, the Quartermaster, and Mr Campbell himself! For some reason, their ship had a high turnover rate, and keeping David’s list short made sure that they didn’t take him away due to some bad blood between ex employees- which he understood completely and was absolutely fine with!

“Really?” That wasn’t good news, that was *great* news, “I don’t know how I did it, but I’ll be happy to meet them!”

“That’s the spirit!” Mr Campbell only smiled with his eyes, but the expression brought warmth nonetheless, “I take it I can trust you to show them the ropes?”

“You can always count on me, sir!” David smiled, giving an adapted version of their Campbell Ship salute. His extra finger and weirdly placed thumb had to be folded in to make it look right because humans were built so silly, “Are they a garden mother? Or a fleurling?”

“Of course not! What a strange idea,” his tone didn’t deviate from its confidence, so David could conclude it wasn’t offensive. “That venomous woman scored big against a ragtag group of pirates who made a poor investment and bit off more than she could chew.”

“Oh, so she was unrelated?” David really tried to keep up, but the amount of missing pieces from Mr Campbell's explanations made it hard sometimes.

“What? Weren’t you listening?” he paused, shooting David a look that made him wilt a bit, “Somehow she got herself a human cub trying to steal my business idea and obviously couldn’t train such a violent little thing. I mean, a human? On a ship of flower scouts? Preposterous!”

What?

“Mr Campbell, are you saying-”

“So then she let me take it off her hands for dirt cheap!” he continued to ramble as he began walking back to the bridge, “I have no idea how those pirates got it with the council keeping such a lock on that hellscape planet, but all I smell is opportunity.”

David really must be jumping to conclusions now. Surely Mr Campbell couldn’t mean what David thought he did, “So is the new crew member the human’s caretaker?”

Mr. Campbell’s noise of amusement came out as one dry note, “That’s you, Davey! Grechin or whatever her face is thinks you need more little friends, right? So this came at the perfect time.”

“Um, I-”

“Just imagine what people will say when they find out that I have *two* humans under my- er, *oversight* as captain,” They reached the door to his quarters all too quickly, and the man stepped inside. “Well, I’ll need to rest after all that business talk. I’m so happy you agreed to take care of that human, Davey. You’re a real team player.”

“But Mr Campbell-” David’s words were lost to the heavy sound of the captain’s quarters sealing airtight for maximum safety, “... I’m not really human,” he finished with a sigh. This was just like hanging up too fast on a phone call... he was sure Mr Campbell didn’t mean anything by it, but by the stars, David was a *little bit* concerned.

Maybe he just needed to hear Gwen’s take on it?

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“Oh hell fucking no!”

“Language,” he winced. Okay, maybe he should’ve expected Gwen’s reaction.

“A human? Is he trying to get us all killed?” the warm brown fur on her snout creased with the way her lips curled, “David, this is going to go spectacularly wrong.”

“Hey now! Look on the bright side,” he chuckled weakly, “If it’s a cub we can probably domesticate it a little, right?”

“Except it’s been passed through two ships already! You don’t think the flower scouts thought of that?”

His best friend was a level headed hellhound. Technically, she was also supposed to be considered dangerous, but David only really saw her get territorial over her cabin and reading material. As long as he stayed clear of those, Gwen was just her normal self, (albeit a bit of a downer at times). If anything, having a good-natured debate about this topic calmed him down because Gwen opposed everything their boss did. Most of the time she was right... But they always figured something out in the end, which made everyone winners!

“But it’s different,” he said, defending Mr Campbell’s idea to both her and himself, “Since I look like a human, I’m sure the little one will settle down since it knows it’s among friends.”

She just settled onto a chair in the restricted lounge with a weary sigh, “I swear, if it didn’t mean I’d have to move back in with my parents, I would be lightyears away from this ship.”

“And because we’re best Campbell crew buddies for life!” David reminded, settling across the table from her. Gwen used the high clearance areas to speak her mind, while David used them to speak in general.

Her maroon bangs fell into her face, and she pushed them back with a defeated noise, “Yeah. Cameron makes that easy to forget. Did he say how long we had to prepare?”

David just smiled, “He was a little busy.”

“Of course he was,” she pulled out her pad with a resigned look, which usually meant she’d gone into damage control mode, “Okay, so it’s omnivorous, mammalian, and obviously a predator. No idea what 'cub' looks like on them, though. I’ll get someone to set up a cell for something your size just in case.”

Gwen might have been an eensie weensie bit overeducated for her job as a general assistant to the captain. Similarly to David, her species made it hard to find interstellar work and was generously given the opportunity to work with Mr Campbell as one of his closest employees. All of those spare skills meant that she was the only person onboard who either had, or knew where to find the solution to any problems arising from their... eccentric business model.

“I knew you’d come around.”

“As long as I don’t have to be in the same room as that thing, it can’t be more dangerous than half the illegal shit we carry,” she sighed.

David laughed, coarsely, “Which is *none*.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” she sighed, opening up her scheduling app.

It wasn’t an endorsement, but wasn’t flat out refusal either. All it meant was that she’d come around to the idea for sure!

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They were getting sick of him. Again.

When the four stooges gave him up to the strange flower people, there had been signs. Even though his bag and all his belongings had been taken from him within the first two weeks, Max had still been finding increasingly inventive ways to attack them. When you’re left in solitary like that, there’s not much else to think about. The day he nearly strangled Fartz with the drawstring to his hoodie was when they seemed to officially consider him a lost cause... for whatever it was they thought they could get from him. No one was ever clear on that.

Regardless, it started with a few more missed meals. Then they stopped bothering to haul him out of his cell for more poking and prodding, which was both a blessing and a curse once the monotonous silence threatened to take him under. Then, there were new faces in his window. The aliens had limbs that emerged from what Max could only describe as upside down flowers, giving the appearance that they were all wearing dresses. Their scrutinizing gazes were almost obscured by the heap of petals on their heads, and despite it being hard to

discern where exactly their mouths were, the flower people spoke in shrill tones that he could hear through the wall.

Then he got to experience the joys of starting from zero.

Time had gotten weird since being abducted, but Max would bet good money that the flower people got sick of him faster than the originals. It helped a lot that he could end any interaction by rearing back and spitting on them. They really hated when he did that. The biting and scratching were always fun since they bled like milkweed, but it was easier to get away from and subsequently restrain his limbs than it was to dodge his consistently improving range.

After not bothering to give him lunch, the short yellow one opened the door to his cell with the determination of a Roman soldier. They'd been making sure to close it behind them nearly immediately after that *one time* he managed to jump the blue one and sprint down the hall. The doors were too weird to get anywhere far, so he didn't see the reason she always had to be so performative about it when the flower person shut it harshly.

"Oh hey," Max perked up, "Ready for another fight? I almost had that stun gun last time. I think I'm really improving my technique."

Max decided that his newest personality trait would be crashing the fuck out as frequently and disastrously as possible. They'd either kill him or he'd die from something stupid like some peasant without modern medicine. Eat something wrong and never be heard from again. It felt inevitable at this point. That was bullshit, and this whole thing was bullshit, and they'd fucking fear him if they knew what was good for them.

"Are you deaf? I said bring it!" He could only square his shoulders and get into a ready stance when she got near. The yellow one was easily the most confrontational, but she was clumsy and easy to fake out.

She lunged for him, green fucking vines coming out to grab him wherever they found purchase. They weren't even bothering with trying to 'train' Max anymore. No gentle movements were going to change the fact that that bitch took Mr Honeynuts. While he knew that losing their interest wasn't a good sign in terms of his guaranteed safety, he'd be damned if it wasn't cathartic to know that everyone was now up to speed that he was an *unwilling* hostage here and always would be.

Max ducked away from the majority and willed his head not to grow light from all the exercise. These aliens must have fucking photosynthesized for sustenance because the little food he got was *not* doing enough for him. That, and the constant fight or flight couldn't help.

"Oh, don't act so outraged," he scoffed, yanking a stray vine off one of his legs and digging his nails into it until the alien screeched and retracted the tendril back into the main body.

Yellow raised the weapon again, and Max was just stupid enough on sleep deprivation and adrenaline to rush her without hesitation. Really, there were a lot of those vine things, but as long as he got to the stupid fucking gun he was more or less confident that he was stronger

than a plant. By the time his reptile brain clued into the fact that this may not have been the best course of action for keeping himself alive, Max was already driving a bony elbow into Yellow's face and trying to pry the damn thing from her not-hand.

"Just- fucking- *give it!*"

If the decibel was irritating from the other side of the cell, the alien screeching directly beside him threw him a little off guard. She yanked upwards and away, but her leafy arm flew just close enough to his face that Max didn't have to think twice before he snapped and bit down. *Don't taste the kale, don't taste the kale-*

The sound of the weapon's hard shell clattering to the floor had Max letting her go, dropping like a stone after it, securing the glossy device with nothing but surprise at his own success. Max had always been too scrawny to win against other kids in his grade at anything other than verbal and psychological warfare, so being as scrappy as he had been these last months had been new.

After securing the weapon, Max staggered to his feet and trained it on her, taking a step back, "Hey, you don't know what I'm saying, but I'm gonna shoot you now so that we're a bit more even."

And he did. Max intended to find out if it could run out of shots.

The sound she made when each eclectic blast crackled over her body drowned out the pneumatic doors opening behind him. Max knew exactly how it felt. The 'bullet' was nothing that scarred, just built to send every nerve *burning*. That feeling was the true mark that let Max know he'd come close to seriously hurting one of them. The previous ship was more generous with their blasts, but the pink flowery alien surely wasn't skimping, either.

Which was probably why Max was shot almost as soon as he turned around.

"Fuck!" was the most he could bite out before Max was gritting his teeth hard enough to hear his molars creak. The bitch got him in the leg, so he could only brace himself against the wave of pain as he sank onto that knee.

Blue and Pink had been behind him, the petals of their dresses curling away in disgust. With shaking aim, Max raised the disciplinary blaster at them and didn't think twice before sending a revenge shot off at Pink. The alien screamed appropriately, and all too soon, he was brought to the ground by the feeling of all his muscles spasming. With his eyes closed, Max almost didn't notice another prick amongst the wash of tingling, but one quick glance was all he needed to know that he'd fucked it for real this time.

Because that was a *big* fucking needle sticking into his arm.

All things considered, he wasn't sure what made him pass out first. It was certainly better than sticking around to process the pandemonium he left behind, though.

But consciousness always came for him with a relentless sort of determination he would have respected were it not the bane of his current existence. Headache, chills, and nausea: the three

best friends of space drugs. Was the Grim Reaper out of fucking range or something? Max could *not* keep waking up in this place with these assholes. He cracked a hazy eye open, trying to see if he was too far to crawl for the mat. But there was less immediate light than expected. Pleasant, but unnatural.

The rest of his brain came online and- Hey, wait a minute- “I’m back in the fucking *box* again!”

Okay, if he was going to go out the airlock, he would’ve appreciated that they did it while he was still unconscious. But then again, those had been his exact sentiments about the ordeal *last time*. As in, when the quartet of cryptid fuckers traded him to the pitchy flower women. Max seriously couldn’t tell if it was a good swap or not, because at least the ugly fucks had a better idea of caloric density.

When his foggy world began to vibrate with movement, all Max felt was a mild sense of exhaustion. He could hear voices. New ones that didn’t belong to the first or second ship of aliens. This wasn’t *similar* to last time. It was happening again. Bought and sold. Discovered and gotten rid of.

“I bite!” Max hollered, “And I shoot, too. Fuck up and I *will* find a way to screw you all over, you hear?”

His ears popped with the pressurization of entering a new ship. Obviously, no one gave a shit about creating some kind of universal standard for conditions. The weight in his body felt minutely off kilter from the slight uptick in artificial gravity, but it was better than feeling too light when he first got on board with the flower aliens. All of these things would soon be the least of his worries, he knew, but Max still somehow had it in him to be pissed off at the discomfort.

A dark blur came a little too close, so Max threw his whole body weight at that side of the box and claimed victory in the startled noise that followed.

But he couldn’t stay in transport forever.

Eventually, the movement stopped and Max was left to sit and think about his actions for an odd half hour or so. Maybe he was overestimating their ideas of courtesy, but if they thought leaving him alone was going to quell the flames he had ready for the moment he came face to face with those fuckers they were dead wrong. In fact, the sound of the side panel of the box beginning to slide open was his starting whistle.

“This is gonna be the worst financial decision you’ve ever made,” he called, stepping into yet another sparse cell. He didn’t even bother checking out his digs when his head swivelled to find and glare at its other occupant and-

He felt his breath catch in his throat, “Holy shit.”

A person.

A real human person.

The man with him now was tall and a little thin, but Max seriously couldn't judge on that front as of late. Pale, like he hadn't seen the sun- or well, any star in a long time, but still had the freckles for it. But he was human. Red hair stayed on top of his head where it was supposed to be, only *two* green eyes facing the front with an upturned nose that wasn't part of a beak or snout or what have you.

"Oh thank fucking fuck," Max breathed, making eye contact, "Do you speak English? Look at you. Of course you do. Where the fuck am I?"

The man let out a nervous sounding laugh and stepped forward, which Max matched with a step back in the direction of the box, "Oh- uh, hard pass. That's ominous as shit."

The man halted, muttering something under his breath that Max couldn't quite catch.

Generally, he was relieved to see another person. It was mostly unfounded, considering humans did unspeakable evil everywhere they went, but at least these would be unspeakable things that made sense. Even if he was evil, Max had a higher chance of understanding how to recognize and use some opening due to regulation or rights or capitalism or literally anything other than some dumb-fuck alien trying to make him tame.

"Not English. Okay, Namaste? Bonjour? Ni Hao? Hola?" he rattled off, feeling nerves creep back in as he saw no dawning recollection on the man's face, "Konichiwa? Hallo? Mrhban? Privet? What kind of fucking rock do you live under?"

The man showed his palms in a placating gesture, and the next words that flowed from his mouth were pure and utter gibberish.

He felt his stomach drop.

Okay, while it wasn't like he spoke a third language outside of the smattering of Hindi kept alive in his immigrant household, Max was pretty sure he'd be able to recognize at least an accent. And in turn, someone living on present day planet earth usually had the mind to pull out Google Translate and try to make it work. Or at least have something prepared? Self-entitled American tourists got by just fine in linguistically remote countries with brute force all the time. Instead, the red headed dude just scanned him over and kept yammering away in his unintelligible mishmash of sound.

"Hey, so either I'm being kind of racist right now or you only speak Alien," he ventured, trying not to feel exposed, "Is there a chance you're fucking with me?"

Or he wasn't.

Max took another look at the man and figured he was somewhere in his twenties. What would a decade out in space do to his head if Max were kept there for that long? That was already the duration of his entire life so far, so he genuinely had no clue. Were they the same, then? He wasn't arrogant enough to think he was the only human swiped off the face of the planet and if that towering guy over there was taken from a young enough age, it's possible he'd *never* learned a human language.

“Okay, are we roommates then?” Max sighed in response to more useless sounds, “Because I’ll warn you that I don’t share.”

Space dude just frowned a bit and settled into a cross-legged seat on the ground.

He held his hand out to Max.

Contrastingly, Max settled against the opposite wall, “Yeah, see, that’s not happening.”

The man looked troubled, fingers knitting together. Primed for more nonsense, he opened his mouth, but the sudden presence of a melody made the other human jump slightly. He then reached into the pocket of his green toned uniform- and, okay, maybe the uniform should’ve tipped him off sooner, but the fucker pulled out what Max understood as a holographic tablet once the small square projected into its larger shape.

So it was like that.

“Oh look who got caught,” Max snipped, feeling his anger flare when their eyes locked again, “It’s your fucking call, asshole. Answer it. Now I know you’re working for *them*.”

Chapter End Notes

I should be able to edit a chapter every day :)

Chapter 3

“What do you *mean* it’s coming here already?” David asked, voice climbing a note.

Gwen pinched the bridge of her nose, “It just *is*, ” she sighed, “Apparently, the damn thing tried to kill them again and it blew the last straw. Sent an officer into critical care.”

“That has to be a rumour,” he said, chewing a nail, “Rumours aren’t nice, Gwen.”

“Well, there’s no way that Penelope Priss would tell us that outright,” she pointed out, watching the Flower Scouting ship dock to theirs through the monitor feed.

Standing, he tried to ignore the growing sense of uncertainty in his stomach, “Mr Campbell wants me down there to meet them soon anyway. I’m sure everything will be fine when I see it for myself.”

He’d go down there and find out it was all just a misunderstanding. Surely a human cub so far from maturity wouldn’t have the capability- but, okay, it *was* human. Death planets meant kill instincts came naturally and quickly to anything considered a predator. Even... juvenile cubs.

“Don’t die,” Gwen said, completely fine to stay in her chair.

David just chuckled, “I’m sure it’s nothing to be concerned about.”

Mr Campbell brought him down from the bridge. Everything about his silver coat and confident stride helped David convince himself that this was going to be fine. He would have liked a little briefing before they got into public space again, but David could save his questions. A captain as seasoned as he was must have seen it all and then some. If he thought that bringing the cub on board was a good idea, then so be it. The rearing of the animal could be done later. Right now, all he had to do was stand beside his captain, literally and metaphorically, as they met the garden mother and her troupe.

The loading bay was a busy place with all of their workers ensuring a smooth hookup, but even in the bustling movement, his eyes caught on the bright colours of the botanical aliens. For once, the eyes weren’t on him. They were on the cage being wheeled down the ramp and into their ship. The cage that undoubtedly contained the only real human he’d been in the same room with in his life. The boxy shape itself couldn’t have been much taller than a metre and David internally shuddered at the thought of being in one.

The language barrier between him and Mr Campbell’s associates only made itself more apparent as the bartering began. All of their guests looked generally unhappy and David himself caught more than a few glares over the course of the conversation.

Then, Mr Cambell made an expectant gesture and the walls of the cage went clear. All sounds in the bay seemed to quiet as curious eyes fell on them. The human cub made no immediate reaction, not knowing it was being observed directly.

But David saw.

And stars, was it small.

Resting against one of the walls with its legs drawn up close to its core was the alleged creature who'd been giving their business partners so much trouble. Surprisingly, its colouring was completely different from David's. A deeper skin tone, hair as dark as the void, and lighter eyes that flicked uncertainly at every shadow cast close to it. Without Gwen's help, he couldn't tell what any of it meant– if anything at all, but David was content to marvel for a moment.

Then the garden mother, in response to something Mr Campbell had said, took it upon herself to lean slightly on the cage, resting a vine on top of it in some display of ownership. While the two were engaged in conversation, only David saw how the cub's eyes locked onto the space where she was leaning with open disdain. In a quick movement, it slammed bodily against the wall separating them.

Either it was a trick of the light, or David caught satisfaction settling onto its features when the woman yelped and took a generous step away.

Sugarcrisps.

Okay, so maybe humans held vindictive tendencies at all ages. Duly noted. All he had to do was find some way not to upset it. Simple.

None of this behaviour seemed to alarm Mr Campbell in any way, and it wasn't long before the deal was finalized. Set in place with a cash exchange and well wishes for the Flower Scouts and their ship.

"Mr Campbell," David began, once they'd gotten back into the restricted areas of the ship, "I don't know if I'm the best person to be in charge of the human. It seems like it would do better with an expert-"

"Nonsense, Davey," he leaned in closer to the observation window on the cell, "There are no experts. That's just what those entitled academics want you to think," his tone was still light, unscathing, so it must have been made from a place of objective truth, "Just go in there and show that cub what it means to be onboard our glorious ship."

"But what if it-"

"You're more than capable," Mr Campbell assured him with a firm pat on the shoulder.

And so, that left David alone in the room with the human. Working up the courage to remotely open the cage was one thing, but not flinching away as the creature made strange

sounds and took its first steps outside was another. On the upside, David now knew how it must have felt to be one of Mr Campbell's business partners, so there was always that.

When they met eyes, he found himself taken in equal parts by caution and childlike wonder.

The cub made a cautious call to him. He could only guess at what it meant.

Okay. Showtime. Be a human.

Letting out an anxious laugh, he ventured a step towards it, earning himself a little bit of chatter and a step backwards from the cub.

"Okay, I'm scary to you?" David muttered, desperately trying not to feel out of his depth. He didn't move closer, instead choosing to leave the ball in the smaller human's court. Mr Campbell trusted him to do this and he would.

The cub cocked its head, making its next call longer and seemingly more punctuated than the last. Was that from agitation? That *must* have been.

David showed it his empty hands, "It's okay, little buddy. I'm David. I'm not scary at all, I promise."

To this, it seemed to quiet down. Animals didn't speak common, but at least he managed to get the idea across.

"There we go," David felt a creeping sense of pride. He was good at this whole human business, "You're actually a cute little guy- thing? I don't actually know what you are, but Gwen will tell me all about it after your checkup."

The cub babbled back at him, waited a bit, and then babbled some more.

Adorable as that was, it really was hard to tell what it wanted. David frowned, sitting down. Maybe it would come up to smell him? Animals did that all the time.

He extended his hand all the way in case it wanted to come over to him, but it did just the opposite and sat down a ways away from him. That didn't seem to be a bad sign, though. He counted getting out of a ready stance to be a win. And some part inside of him was still thankful for the distance between himself and such a versatile creature. But regardless of something as trivial as personal safety, all nature from all planets was wonderful and David was already beginning to see the best in this little cub.

Then his tablet began to ring with an incoming call.

The stark noise split through their delicate silence without preamble. Not being a sapient species, it was no wonder he received an angry noise from the cub when he opened it. Something like that was probably classified as loud and scary, so David answered as fast as possible without reading the caller ID.

Gwen's face came into view quickly. "Are you dead yet?"

“No?” he said, flicking his attention between him and the grumpy-faced cub.

“Well, that thing should be.”

“Gwen!” David gasped, then immediately cringed when the human tensed at his volume.

She remained unfazed, “I mean, according to this file they literally fed it a lethal poison before transport. They reported that it only worked as a short-term sedative for humans, but I just had to check.”

Despite himself, glanced anxiously at the cub, “It seems fine? I mean, it looks nothing like me, so I don’t know how I could tell.”

“David, it’s the most like-you thing on this whole ship,” she pointed out, “We’ll feed and water the stubborn runt and see if it lives... But that’s one hell of a metabolism.”

“Could you bring some down?” David asked, hopefully.

After a long and annoyed sound, Gwen made an affirmative snuff, “But I won’t go in. Poisoned or not, I still think this idea is batshit.”

“Language. See you soon, crew buddy,” David smiled, ending the call as he turned back to the cub, “Now where were we?”

The cub held out a loose fist, then displayed the innermost finger on that hand as it made another complicated vocalization.

“Did you hurt your finger? Can I see?” David cooed, scooting a little closer as he scanned it for injury.

The resulting sound was less than friendly, so David retreated back to his side of the cell. Okay, so the cub was big on personal space. That was a simple enough request for a being with dense teeth and a high level of jaw strength. Considering David hadn’t been outright attacked yet, he thought he was doing a good job of figuring out where the boundaries were.

They sat together in relative silence for a while, the cub occasionally tossing him a babel that David wasn’t human enough to respond to, but generally did a good job of waiting patiently until Gwen arrived. For safety reasons, the food was set in a two doored space in the wall. Once Gwen put the food in from the outside, David opened the one inside the room and set it down in front of the cub.

“Oh, maybe you’re just a little hangry,” David hummed, curiously watching the strange little ritual it did, “Our friend Gwen picked this out for you.”

Maybe this wouldn’t be as hard as he thought.

— — —

Strangling that bootlicking idiot could be saved until Max ate, he reasoned.

The man looked at him weird for rubbing his hands on his pants, but Max always tried to have somewhat clean hands before eating. His reasoning was that if it didn't come off on his pants, then it wouldn't come off on his food. It had been so long that he knew it was wishful thinking, but the perceived dignity made him less hesitant to just grab it off the tray on the floor and eat like the animal he so clearly was mistaken for.

"Damn," Max said with a full mouth, "Okay, maybe you're not a shit roommate. If this is what selling out gets, then I'm interested."

Max hadn't eaten meat since he got abducted. That wasn't to say it hadn't been offered to him, but he wasn't going to gnaw on a raw slab of mystery flesh thrown into his cell by the first batch of aliens. And when he eventually got hungry enough, well, the obvious happened. He was pretty sure the flower people were diehard vegans, which made a bit more sense, but he was sick of the fucking leaves by now. Tasting something that had been actually cooked was enough to make his previously dormant stomach roar back to life.

It wasn't seasoned or anything! Max's body was probably just informing him he was iron deficient now.

"I swear to god if I barf this up I will kill you," he informed the other human curtly, "Nothing personal."

White guy and his staring problem lit up completely. The smile he shone in Max's direction was bright as hell, and Max decided that finding out however the fuck he found toothpaste onboard would be his next conquest. If that overgrown leprechaun could be clean shaven and healthy, then Max could hold the faintest hope that his situation was about to take a major upgrade.

Regardless, Max slowed down towards the end of his meal. The cell didn't have many places to stash things per se, but he wouldn't have to hide it if he put up enough of a fight.

Max resisted the urge to shrink away when the man came up to him. Instead, he grabbed the food tray and pulled it closer to himself, "I already said I don't share."

But the man just went past him, approaching the cramped cage he came in and collapsed the structure after typing something in on his tablet. The material that could withstand his struggle folded down and into itself like a plastic table in no time at all.

"Oh," he said, intelligently.

Okay, so this guy was allowed to use technology. He was allowed to have his own uniform and stupid brown vest and understand how the doors worked. Max could use that, but in

order to do so he needed to learn as much as possible. That being said, there was a language barrier and Max was still so hopped up on adrenaline that another person in the room with him had the most infuriating way of making him feel uneasy.

The man said something else to him, walking back to the food hatch and pulling something else out. Even if nothing but tones and body language could come across, it was slightly amusing that they talked anyway. He pulled out a thermos, looking at Max and shaking it a few times to make the liquid inside slosh.

“Toss it over,” Max held out a palm expectantly, “Water. Hand. Now.”

Instead, the man sat back down and shook the thermos again with meaningless chatter.

“Yes, water. I want it,” he said, exasperated.

Neither of them moved until he shook the thermos again.

“Man, this fucking blows,” he sighed, tapping a fingernail against the glossy floor, “Might as well be in here alone. You strike me as stupid.”

At this point, he was getting pissed off. That fucker wanted Max to come to him? Alright. He would.

Max stood, trying to psychically transmit as much mal intent as possible. His shoes got taken away a long time ago on the first ship because he kept throwing them, but literally anything to smack this guy with would have been appreciated. Whatever. Max settled for pushing up the tattered sleeves of his hoodie and making direct eye contact while cracking his knuckles. So what if he towered over Max? Max had moxie and spite and a built up immunity to electric shocks and anaesthetic.

And he was *thirsty* for fuck’s sake.

Wisely, the man set the thermos on the ground and rolled it over to Max. Whatever he was saying dipped into some level of concern, and Max took it as victory enough before he ripped the lid off and downed half the bottle before the man could change his mind. The more he drank, the less it held its shape. Max was disappointed to see it lose functionality as a weapon, but it was still noted.

“Just you wait, I’ll run this ship,” he panted, finally stopping for air, “Try that again and see what happens.”

He did not, in fact, try that again. The next hour or so was spent without much active interaction. The man just typed away at his tablet and Max mentally weighed the pros and cons of fighting him for it just to see what would happen. Since his show of intimidation, the man had been giving him a wide berth, but he also wouldn’t stop glancing at him. There would be no surprise attacks.

Max stood up anyway. He had to test his limits somehow.

To this, the redhead guy took immediate notice and said something slow and gentle as a supposed attempt at appeasement.

He held out a hand for the tablet.

“Pass it to me.”

Amused gibberish.

“I’m not fucking around,” Max stepped towards him, “I said give it.”

That genius eventually got the message that this was happening, and Max watched him carefully turn off the projection and slipped the small square back into his pocket.

“Good, now give it to me.”

Tentatively, the man stood up, rising several heads taller than Max. His form wasn’t rigid, but it wasn’t cowardly either. He showed his empty palms to Max again and the idea was almost insulting. Dulcet tones meant nothing to him.

He raised an eyebrow, “I have object permanence, you know. You just put it into your pocket.”

All he got in return was nervous laughter.

Okay. Okay, he could pick a fight right now.

So what if his lunge was telegraphed? That didn’t mean he expected the man to *scruff* him by the hood of his sweater. That was humiliating!

“I am going to make your life *hell!*” he declared, shouting over the panicked sounds the man made.

Infernal rage had never ignited so quickly, but his scrabbling hands could only scratch so much at the arm holding him before he was being placed on the floor. By the time Max could adjust his hood and make a second pass, the door to the cell had closed abruptly in his face. All those years in outer space had done *clearly* nothing to inhibit the lanky man’s athletic ability.

And then he was alone. Well, possibly not, considering the obvious one way mirror on the wall beside the exit, but still.

Maybe thinking he was a cellmate was too much to assume when the man had displayed so many liberties without a second thought. All it did was confirm Max’s suspicions that he had a hand in his relocation. Even if it was just as a cog in the machine. If Max was in a cell and that guy wasn’t, then a pecking order had already been established. As it stood, there was no way he and that rando had equal ground in this strange place. The only option was to play the game or display enough violence to get what he wanted.

“Oh, are you gonna call your mom?” Max goaded the door, giving it a test kick that sadly didn’t make it budge, “If you need back up to fight a ten year old, then you’re weaker than I thought.”

No one answered. Even after he’d paced the meager perimeter of his new world over a dozen times, the only thing that came back for him was the unstoppable onset of exhaustion. As soon as he’d had the thought, the lights in his cell dimmed until he could just barely make out the cot in the corner. Guess it was bedtime.

With a resigned sigh, Max lay down. He was too sick and tired of being sick and tired to sleep somewhere else as an act of defiance. Not today. Today, he had more questions than answers, somehow managed to feel let down *twice* and actually had enough food in him to warrant redirecting energy for digestion.

“Goodnight,” Max muttered to no one in particular. It just became a habit.

In the quiet of space, you’d be surprised how easy it was to get into your own head.

Max had been estranged. On Earth, and off of it. There was no limit to the amount of times he could feel left behind or generally ignored by his parents. It’s why he ran away, wasn’t it? But being alone in space had been entirely worse so far. Not a word to understand or be understood for between him and his captors. No media to escape into or crowd to disappear in. Max had never felt so well and truly forgotten.

Silently, he hoped the human came back.

— — —

“*Gwen.*”

“Oh no,” she held a hand up, “I know that tone of voice.”

Regardless, he was already moved to tears, “It’s just- it seems so curious, and it made so many little calls at me. Who knew humans were that vocal?”

“Does it matter?” she sighed, opening her medical kit, “The damn thing sure clawed the shit out of your arm.”

David only winced at the cool sting of antiseptic, “I’m sure it was just a long day for everyone.”

“Everyone except Cameron Campbell,” she sighed, winding bandages around the claw marks. “Have you even considered asking for hazard pay?”

Sure, he had to make a, well, *tactical* retreat when the cub started getting uppity, but it was a far cry from a near death experience. Considering that the first two items in his hands were

both food and something he intended to hand to the human, it made logical sense that it thought the holopad was no different. The poor little friend probably thought it could eat it. Maybe violence isn't the right way to go about it, but that was just how nature operated sometimes.

“Being able to foster a connection with such a misunderstood species is an *opportunity*, Gwen,” David chided, “Doing it for money would mean my heart is in the wrong place.”

She lowered her ears in distaste, snipping off the end of the gauze to mutter under her breath, “I don’t think that thing cares where your heart is as long as it finds a way to rip it out and eat it.”

Wanting to change the subject, he drew back his arm, “Let’s just focus on what we do know without the fear mongering.”

While they hadn’t been given much prep time, Gwen was exceptionally good at studying. And what was more interesting than a rare deathworlding species as developed as a human? She pretended to want nothing to do with their new addition to the ship, but David saw her bring her computer with her around mealtimes to read articles more often since Mr Campbell said they’d be getting it.

“Well I don’t know much without a formal survey,” she sighed, “But from what I saw in the observation room, it has all its limbs and didn’t seem like it had just been poisoned into unconsciousness.”

“That’s a good thing,” David nodded, “What about its colouring?”

“I can actually confirm that it’s normal,” she passed him a holopad with enough academic jargon that he could barely read it, “Information about their home planet is nearly exclusively classified, but apparently their planet gets a lot of ultraviolet rays. Skin tones vary by region.”

David squinted at the page, “I’ll take your word for it... so it’s not indicative of gender or anything?”

“Nope,” her snout wrinkled a bit, “It’s too young to tell at a glance, and I for one do not volunteer to check.”

“I saw little bumps on its teeth. Why don’t I have those?”

Gwen thought for a moment, opening a few more tabs, “Mamelons are only seen in the youth for some reason. Your genetic sample was just older.”

Everything he learned about the little one only reiterated the fact that this was a baby. An aggressive one, but a baby nonetheless. David had heard stories of what humans would do to reunite with their cubs again, and he couldn’t help but wonder what terrible thing happened to its parents to be left all alone like that. This little human may have been temperamental, but it was also missing primary caregivers and protectors. The law of the jungle insisted that the cub found its own security and that was probably why it lashed out so much.

“Do you think Mr Campbell would mind if I named it?” David asked, hopefully.

Her ear flicked, like it couldn’t believe what she was hearing, “Oh no. You’re *naming* the deathworlder.”

“I’m thinking... Larry Two?”

“After your pet rodent? Seriously?”

“It’s a good name! And it’s the ship’s rodent,” he corrected, thinking of the Laneus mouse in the lounge, “Every good ship has a mascot.”

Gwen fixed him with a flat look, “Okay, veto for Larry Two.”

“David Junior.”

“That’s *way* too attached.”

“What about Fuh?” he tried, “It makes that sound a lot.”

“You know what? I don’t care,” she put her head in her hands, “Name it whatever you want. I’m just warning you not to get attached to it.”

She might not have understood now, but David knew that if he tried hard enough, Fuh (Unisex?) would be the pride of the whole ship. Never in his life was he able to commit only halfway, and he had no intentions of starting when there was a creature in need. The only way he could know if the human would open up to him was to do his best, and he was certain that if he just tried hard enough, everything would fall into place.

David looked Gwen in the eyes, searching for confidence, “I really want to do this. Best Campbell crew buddies for life?”

Her face flickered, hesitation being chipped away as she fought a smile back, “Yeah.”

M-a-x

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Max was getting sick of this guy's bullshit.

It had only been a few days, but honestly, what's a few days when your life was literally four walls? All Max had found out was that his now *human* captor must've had nothing better to do. Who was flying the ship? No clue. Who was bringing the food? Not him. Every time that fucking cell door opened, it was tall ginger and pasty. Nobody was drawing straws to interact with Max this time. He got the impression that that guy kept coming back because he *wanted* to.

Not once had he entered the cell while armed, but the man was tall enough that Max could never jump him successfully. Every attempt just got him scruffed. Max could kick, scream and bite, but his captor was equally stubborn. For all his panicked squealing at each injury, the man just never clued into the fact that he could give up. How was Max losing to that level of thickheadedness? It was maddening.

If there was any reprieve, these people knew he needed three square meals a day. Most of the time it was the same plant and meat combo, but even shitty tasting food was fine as long as it was consistent. The only other time he'd eaten something close to a fruit was when the man tried to eat lunch with him side by side on the second day. Max stole it off his tray and shoved it in his mouth before it could be taken back, and his first taste of sugar in months had been well worth the concerned looks he got for the next two hours. If that guy could eat it, *obviously* it wouldn't poison Max either.

The cell door opened, and Max made an indignant groan from his cot. He was still sleeping.

Calling out a string of sounds that sounded much too cheery, the man strode into his cell and immediately began approaching him.

"I may not know what time it is," Max said, sitting up with a glare, "But I sure as hell don't think anyone in their right mind would be doing all that."

The man cooed, stopping at the edge of the cot with the tablet in one of his hands.

Okay, maybe he didn't feel that tired.

"Oh, you think that's cute, huh?" he rasped, dehydrated from a night of sleep, "Fucking idiot."

Max lurched forward, on his feet in an instant and already closing his fingers around the device by the time the man could cry out. Before he could be grabbed, Max weaved past him

and ran to the far side of the small room while trying to figure out the alien tech.

“Hey Siri,” he called to it sarcastically as he tried and failed to get his fingers to interact with the holographic display inside, “GPS maps to Earth.”

The man made another swipe for him that Max could just barely duck out of.

“Google translate English to Martian,” he said, after a particularly panicked sentence came out of his keeper, “Sorry bud, no hablo.”

Just as he made the monumental accomplishment of making the screen turn yellow, Max’s wrist was seized.

“Motherfucker! I was getting somewhere with that!” he hissed, tugging at the offending grasp.

Flailing around to keep it didn’t work, as the man just pulled his hand higher than Max could comfortably reach and pried the holopad from his fingers. It didn’t hurt, but it was embarrassing how easily he got it back and held it out of reach. Each of his venomous curses was traded for strained but gentle gibberish. Even once he was released and allowed to stalk back to his side of the cell, the man kept wasting breath. He might not have been able to understand the next ten minutes of monologue, but lecturing someone in a disappointed tone transcended language.

“You’re seriously trying to teach me manners?” Max asked, dryly.

More tutting and crossed arms.

“Okay, my turn,” he decided, tipping the edge of his words with the smouldering anger that always existed inside him these days, “Because if we’re airing out our grievances, I’m sick of being treated like an animal.”

The tone of threat only fed a few more lines to the lecture, but he seriously wasn’t having it. No more of this. The man was crouched to look him in the eyes, and at this rate, he would rather actually communicate than whatever had been going on. Especially when he’d been hearing a phrase a little too often, and was inclined to think it might have been his new name to this weirdo.

“Hey!” Max cut him off, earning himself a few blinks, “First off, it’s Max. M-A-X.”

The man opened his mouth-

“Max,” he cut in, “Because if the next word out of you isn’t Max then I’m kicking you in the shin.”

The man made a confused sound, going back to his chatter until Max stepped up and swung his foot hard enough that he was sure there would be a mark left under the pant leg.

“Shhhhh! Shut up, just shut up,” Max interrupted his cry of betrayal with an accusing finger, “Do I have to mime this out for you? I can do that.”

Interestingly, the man held his silence.

“*Max*,” he enunciated, planting a hand over his chest with a thump, “Max.”

The next line of surprised nonsense had something that could be interpreted as ‘*mack-suh*’ tacked on to the end, but the man had mirrored the gesture.

“No! *I’m* Max,” he reached out and grabbed the man’s hand this time, pressing it against his chest, “My name is Max, you dumb fuck.”

The man stared at his hand, then at Max, and eventually a single syllable fell out of his mouth:

“Max.”

Holy shit.

Letting go of him, Max drew back to nod dramatically, “Yeah, I’m Max.”

He hadn’t heard someone call him that in what felt like ages. Every word from this place had been confusing and impossible to understand. To be honest, none of them had even talked to him as much as the man had, so the chances of learning had been slim to none until now. More nonsense had hardly been a comfort, but to have someone call him by his name... to speak *to* him as opposed to at him, nearly caught him off guard. The direct confirmation of being acknowledged after all this time— It cut through the levels of distance between them until the contact weighed more than any atmosphere.

The man raised his finger, pointing at him, “Max.”

This was happening.

He thumped his chest again, a surreal shock washing out any annoyance from his voice
“Max. I’m Max”

There was a long moment of silence between them. Then slowly, with shaking fingers, the man placed a hand on his own chest.

“*David*.”

Max blinked, scrambling to register and repeat the sound, “Day-fid.”

“David,” the man repeated, going slower.

Max pointed at him, “David.”

Instead of the positive confirmation he would’ve expected from such an annoyingly bubbly person, David looked like Max had just personally mowed down his grandmother. If such a white dude looked pale before, any rosiness to his cheeks drained with the rest of its blood. Like it genuinely shocked him that a kid Max’s age was old enough to speak or something. But he’d been speaking this whole time, so maybe he was just being dramatic again?

“That’s you. You’re *David*,” he repeated, watching gleefully as the man flinched.

— — —

David’s first thought was that he wished Gwen were there.

Because humans didn’t speak. Could they make their own calls? Of course. Mimic a few words for food? Sure, that made sense. If they truly were deathworlders, than consciousness would revolve around tactics or mobility so they could hunt and gather. Whatever the minimum requirement for pack coordination was, they could probably evolve out of pure necessity. That was why Fuh was such a clever little beastie. When David thought he knew the little cub was smart, that was the extent of his expectations. After all, not once had the universe secured a violent specimen and determined anything otherwise.

Logic and knowledge told him that he must have been losing it. That it was just too early in the morning for jumping to conclusions. *Gwen* could tell him that much.

But David was pretty sure Fuh just taught him its *real* name.

How? How could this be happening? Ten minutes ago he was chasing Fuh around the room trying to get his holopad back. Curiosity in a species like that was to be expected. Fuh wanted the technology because it was shiny, or thought it could be eaten, and obviously didn’t accomplish anything by mashing on the touchscreen. *That*, was how he expected humans to behave. Even kicking him in the middle of his behavioural reform speech was par for the course of a mildly agitated cub.

But then it seemed like it wanted something. Fuh interrupted him to make that one, *specific* call with *specific* gesturing. He even let David make physical contact with him for the first time ever. That *must* have been important. Something about the much smaller hand in his held an urgency. The feeling of a heartbeat through the strange blue cloth the flower scouts must have dressed it in. All of it felt important.

“Max,” David repeated, eventually. The syllables felt strange, but he and the cub had the same vocal cords. Same mouths. He could make the small hissing sound at the end by forcing air through his teeth.

Part of him wanted to think it didn’t mean anything when the cub seemed satisfied. That the improved mood was just a success at getting David to play whatever nonsensical game it had going on in its head. Mimicking was probably a hilarious pastime for the little one. Maybe. Hopefully.

So David introduced himself in turn.

“Day-fid,” the human echoed.

Something inside him held its breath. Even still, he slowed down the pronunciation, “David.”

Then, clear as day, the human pointed at him and said, “David.”

Okay. Maybe it really was time to start panicking. Where was Gwen?

The human looked pleased with itself, chattering something else with *David* as the ending word. Except that might not have been chatter in the way he’d assumed. The chance arose that it could have been a real *language*. Oh stars. Okay. Where was the protocol for this?

He felt for the holopad in the pocket of his uniform but stopped when he realized that Fuh- no *Max*, would probably try to take it from him again. Even if he did manage to have a coherent conversation with Gwen or Mr Campbell or anyone— how would he possibly prove that the human just spoke to him? Gwen didn’t want to be anywhere near the little human and Mr Campbell was usually still in bed this time of day.

Taking a deep breath, David grounded himself in the present moment and folded his legs into a cross-legged seat. This... this was probably just him blowing things out of proportion. Just because Fuh wanted to play a new prank didn’t mean that was a name... Did it?

“*Max*, ” David began, internally cringing when the cub’s eyes snapped to attention, “Okay, Max, uh- Oh shoot, I should probably start calling you that now, huh?”

Max crossed its- their? Arms and said something back that was wholly alien... apart from when the cub leaned in with a smug look and said, “David,” in a tone he had quickly learned to be snarky.

Each time he heard his own name out of the human’s mouth, another nail was sunk in the coffin. Those hoots felt less and less like human noises and more and more like human *language*. This wasn’t a gauge of intelligence you could find by asking the cub to get a biscuit out of a puzzle box. This was sentence structure, dialect, and common phrases. It felt like they’d skipped so many things. Non-sapient creatures couldn’t just come out with an entire language could they? Hold on- did that mean ‘*fuh*’ meant something? David had so many questions.

“Are- are you actually talking to me?” he asked, aware that it was probably futile if Max couldn’t understand him, “Because that- that’s going to be a big deal.”

“David,” Max said, voice suddenly serious. They pointed at him, except the hand was palm up and the finger curled back inward a few times.

“Wha- Oh!” He was being beckoned! That was a ‘*come here*’ gesture.

David approached Max, squatting down to get on the small human’s level as they continuously made the becoming motion. He didn’t exactly know *why*, but Max seemed pretty insistent.

“What is it?” he asked, and to his surprise, Max’s tiny index finger poked him in the chest.

The moment he looked down, that finger rose to flick him in the chin.

“Hey! What?” David was at a complete loss, but Max let out a peel of laughter, “*That’s* what you wanted me to see? Are we playing again?”

Max babbled, “*David,*” and then babbled some more.

Okay. That was kind of cute.

He just accepted it, suspicious of the fact that he might be being insulted, but there was nothing he could do about it. That was- David was getting a headache just trying to imagine what that was supposed to mean. Max was acting childish, but they were obviously a *child* so they couldn’t be an accurate measure of humanity and their abilities. But what if it was something else? Stars, was Max *truly* a human? Full blooded?

He looked at the cub, who just puffed their chest a bit at the attention.

What did it know? What had it seen? He supposed he hadn’t given much thought as to where the human had come from. It was a deathworlder from a restricted planet attained through dubious means at *best*. Had it been born in the wild or in captivity? Did it *understand* what was going on? Would Mr Campbell know what to do?

Then the mealbox beeped cheerfully, disrupting his train of thought.

Gwen.

Gwen was there and just dropped it off.

“Gwen!” he called out, on his feet in an instant.

The cub was immediately on guard, but David set his guilt aside in the name of speed. After performing the fastest possible exit of a secure room without accidentally freeing Max, David broke out into the hall. Yes, he knew this was technically *his* responsibility and Gwen had made it *very* clear she was afraid of it, but every shred of independence left him when he realized she was there and could probably help him make sense of what was going on.

“Shit! What’s happening?” Gwen’s whole body drew rigid as an immediate reaction to his panicked exit, “Is that thing out?”

“No! No!” he looked at her helplessly, feeling the incredulity of the situation fill him, “Fuh just spoke! Their name is Max!”

“Spoke?” Gwen’s ears went up in shock, “Like in Common?”

David glanced back at the cub through the observation window, “No- but please, just come in and see.”

“Are you crazy?” she hissed, “Humans only speak violence and I am *not* seeing it up close.”

“But *Gwen.*”

“I-” the words broke off as she failed to come up with more, “Call me. I’ll wait outside and see it for myself.”

“Okay.” David pulled out his holopad. He could work with that.

The secure containment mechanisms clicked to unlock before he entered and the door began its automatic close. Nervously, he made eye contact with Max and cautiously kept a leg out in case the cub tried to make a run for it (which would be much more disastrous with Gwen right outside). Max hadn’t moved much, but they stood marginally closer to the food cubby. Moments away from getting up to no good if he had to guess.

“Are you looking?” he spoke into the device’s microphone.

“Yeah.”

He took a baited breath, “Hey, Max.”

Max’s attention went from the cubby and back to him. A raised eyebrow in judgment as the cub snipped something back at him.

“That doesn’t mean anything.” Gwen’s look of distrust could be heard through the speaker.

“It really does,” he defended, watching as the cub decided to ignore him and begin to poke at the locked cubby, “Because right now they’re not listening, but the moment I say, Max-”

The human’s head turned, their actions stopping momentarily.

“... they do that.”

A pause on the line had some small sense of relief creep in, “Okay, that’s weird. It just told you its name?”

“Long story short,” he confirmed, “I taught them mine too.”

“What? Are you shitting me?”

David had to pull his head away from the device from her volume, “Potty mouth, Gwen. They’re still just a cub. I can promise you that they can say my-”

“David!” the human snapped, giving the food cubby a hard smack. The sentence had more words in it, but that was the one given the most definition.

“Holy fuck.”

He resisted the urge to agree, “Language.”

The next act of transgression against the food cubby’s hatch was forceful enough to rattle the metal where it was fused to the wall. That kick looked strong, and David had a bruise forming from earlier that could corroborate that notion. And, okay, he only felt *slightly* less

physically safe after thinking about it. Considering the cub was staring at him again, the message was pretty clear. Feed them and no one gets hurt.

“Oh, I think they’re hungry,” David walked up to the cub, gently reaching over to unlock the mechanism with the chip embedded in his wrist.

“You think?”

This time, he didn’t stop the human from reaching in and taking the tray as soon as the hatch opened. Max did their strange ritual of smacking their thighs and generally rubbing their hands over the threadbare cloth with the same amount of dedication as usual. David passively wondered if they would be open to replacing the tattered garments, if only because they seemed to be trapping grime.

David glanced at the false mirror where he knew Gwen was watching, “I told you about this earlier. Do you think it’s a religion?”

“I don’t think so,” she murmured back, voice distant with concentration, “At least, if humans have a god, I don’t want to know about it.”

Theology aside, Max scrutinized their hands and picked at them a bit before finally grabbing a fistful of leaves and beginning their meal formally.

An audible breath made its way through the line from Gwen, “It was trying to get *clean*. ”

Oh stars.

With the way the human acted, David had been more or less under the assumption that all they cared about was food, escape, and getting cheap entertainment out of him. The idea of cleanliness hadn’t crossed his mind whatsoever before. Animals didn’t seem to mind a little natural oils, and even pets were only bathed when it became needed. The human was harsh, bitey, and wholly impossible to understand when it came to certain behaviours he’d seen in the cell. Trying to introduce it to water felt so out of the question that he hadn’t even thought of it.

But Max was no ordinary animal.

“Gwen, they’re *smart*. ”

“Or evolved to not poison itself,” she shot back as they both watched the human eat.

Noticing his gaze, Max said something with David’s name in it and turned around until their back was facing them. Something told him that Max, like most people, felt more comfortable eating without an active audience.

He winced, “I think I made them self conscious.”

“Or territorial! Stop staring it down!”

It felt like he and Gwen were at an impasse. Most of his Max related stories were carried secondhand over lunch or dinner, and there was no way to convey them as perfectly as when he'd lived them. David was sure Gwen could agree with him if she just saw the cub the way he did. Or at the very least stuck around.

"Gwen, I want you to meet them," he said as the food on Max's tray began to dwindle.

She made a frustrated sound, "I am perfectly fine observing from out here."

"Then clear the window. I want to introduce you."

With a begrudging sigh through the speaker, David watched the mirror ripple and assume its unveiled form of a window. And through it, he could see her standing in the hall. Gwen's canine features were pinched with uncertainty and her holopad was close to her chest, but David was far more interested in the cub's reaction to this new development.

— — —

Max blinked at his new observer. The only other being apart from David that he'd seen since boarding the new ship. Their appearance was, well, unique.

"I'm not judging, but why the hell is there a furry out there?" he asked the man, using his tongue to pick the last bit of salad from his teeth.

The newest alien was somebody's wolfsona for sure. Her fur was the medium brown shade you would expect to find on a dried oak leaf in autumn, apart from the longer maroon coloured mane that sprouted from her head. In addition to an anthropomorphic shape, she had the ears, tail, and snout combo that he'd seen everywhere on the internet. Hell, the thing had purple fucking eyes! Half of him was in disbelief at encountering something like that in the infinite vastness of space while the rest of him catalogued sharp teeth and nails.

Why was she there?

"Seriously. *David?*" Max snapped his fingers a few times to get his attention and pointed to their guest, "The fuck is up?"

Squatting down to his level, David yammered something between him and the wolfgirl before turning his attention back to Max with a grin.

"Gwen," he said slowly, pointing to the other alien outside.

So *that's* what he was always on about. Losing his shit when the food box made a sound was a weird play, but he had shouted what Max was now certain was this furry alien's name. In hindsight, the word itself felt fairly familiar, so this probably wasn't the first time he had spoken about her. But even so, introducing Max to all his fucked up buddies as a party trick was not what he had in mind when he wanted to be taken more seriously.

“Nice. Good for her,” Max deadpanned, pretending to not be interested.

Gwen’s voice came through the holopad again, dry and growl-ey in some places. Seeing the alien’s mouth move with each syllable confirmed that David was actually talking to her this whole time instead of listening to a podcast or something.

“*Max*,” David said, this time with more insistence behind it, “Gwen.”

As he weighed his options, Max stalked up to the glass and observed how the woman took a preventative step back from the cell. On one hand, this was stupid and Max didn’t want to do what David said like a good *complicit* captive. If anything, he should be trying to find a way to scare both him and this Gwen character far, far, away from him. The more realistic part of Max knew that them giving a shit about this could be a promising gateway to his escape in the future. A new variable to work with.

He looked Gwen in the eyes and poked his finger at the glass, “Fine. You win, *Gwen*.”

While the aliens began to talk back and forth about *something*, Max just huffed at once again being left out of the loop. Except, the breath he let out made a small ghosting of fog on the glass that he hadn’t expected. For whatever reason, he didn’t think something inside a spaceship could do that.

“Screw whatever you guys are talking about,” Max announced, drawing a deep breath to create a larger patch of fog.

Before it could fade away, he stuck his finger to the surface and began working in crude strokes, “M... A... X...” he narrated, forcefully smacking the space next to his calligraphy in lieu of a period, “Max. That’s how you spell it.”

Chapter End Notes

I figured she reads enough werewolf stuff in canon that it wasn't a stretch for her alien au XD

Earth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“David,” Gwen breathed, “Take a damn picture.”

Before the script could dissipate, he quickly did as he was told and captured the scene digitally. He was somewhat thankful for the order, because otherwise David would have sat there star-struck for the next five minutes trying to wrap his head around the fact that the same creature that bit him several times could be *literate*. Not in common, but in shaky, stick-like letters that corresponded to all of that chatter.

“Do you believe me now?” he asked, openly gawking at the cub.

Several emotions flashed across his best friend’s face, eventually settling into resigned dread, “Oh we’re going to *jail*, jail.”

“*What?*” David lowered his volume when the human tensed beside him, “No one’s going to the j-word. I’m sure it’s all a big misunderstanding.”

“That thing passes one IQ test and *all* of us are down for trafficking and forcible confinement,” she shot back, “You do realize shit just got infinitely more complicated, right?”

“We should tell Mr Campbell,” David wrung his hands, “He’ll know what to do.”

The human’s bright eyes caught the action, and slowly, one of those small hands reached for his own, “David.”

“Hm? Oh, of course,” he held it out, a little confused about what they wanted, but completely bewitched nonetheless, “Wha- *Max!*”

No sooner than when he felt Max’s hand in his own did he feel it *yank*, making David’s wrist harshly collide with the metal casing of the food cubby. Max released him instantly afterward, but pain was already racing up the limb. What reason in the entire universe could the human possibly have to motivate doing something like-

The hatch unlocked.

Standing on tippy toes, the cub peered inside only to see that there was no more food, and the hatch on Gwen's side of the hall remained to be closed.

It made a lot more of those fuh sounds after that.

“David, this doesn’t change the fact that little Max over there is still the spawn of *Fenrir*. ”

Rubbing his tender wrist, David hummed a negative, “They’re probably just understimulated. We should find some kiddie stuff for them to play with while we figure things out.”

The feeling of responsibility began to mount and David did his best to keep the growing nerves under control. Mr Campbell needed to know. Max needed to not live in a cell. David wanted desperately to know more about what was going on behind the cub’s eyes and the cub deserved to know everything they had to offer about the situation. The *how* on that topic was blurry so he mentally put a pin in it until he could get his superior in the loop.

“Okay Max,” David addressed the cub for his own peace of mind, “Gwen and I are going to take care of something and we’ll be right back. *David is coming back soon.*”

Talking to the human had been a self-comfort before, but now he realized that Max should learn as much Common as their brain could catch onto. How did you teach someone a second language when translation was impossible? Max was the only human in lightyears, never mind one that spoke both Human and Common. It would all have to be direct, blunt knowledge. Like holding up an object and sounding out letters kind of learning.

Max opened and closed their hand many times and rolled their eyes.

Whatever that meant, it must not have been an affirmative to stay out of trouble. The moment David attempted to leave, Max was right there by the door in a blatant attempt to get out as soon as it opened. David couldn’t blame the cub for wanting freedom, but on a functional level, Max would only wreak havoc if set free unsupervised. He still felt unreasonably guilty that he had to hold Max back with his leg and carefully close the door before the human could surge forward again.

“Please pick up,” Gwen groaned, watching as the call to their captain was immediately dropped. When it asked her to record a message, Gwen just shut it off.

They found themselves outside Mr Campbell's sleeping quarters once he ignored the next few messages that followed.

“Hello?” he called, “Mr Campbell?”

When the door opened, Mr Campbell was still freshly awoken despite the hour.

“Ah! David, Jen,” he stood in his blue striped pyjamas, took one look at them, and closed the door slightly, “I’m sure you have a good reason for waking me. I’ll be right with you.”

“Gwen,” she corrected, but the door had already shut.

When their Captain emerged, he was back in uniform. While he wore the same standard issue brown vest as David, but the shirt underneath remained a stark white instead of sage green. Finally, things felt a little more back to normal. Just seeing Mr Campbell was enough to put his mind more at ease. A good captain always had a solution, and if he didn’t, he knew someone who did. Cameron Campbell was stable like that.

“Sorry to bother you, sir,” he began, fighting with the urge to tell him that everything was fine and that David was doing a great and praiseworthy job, “It’s just that it’s come to our attention that the project you put me on might-”

“The human’s sapient,” Gwen interrupted, cutting to the chase with an efficiency David wasn’t sure he was ready for, but also appreciated as a primary trait of his friend.

To this, Cameron Campbell let out a booming snort, “Jerika, you crack me up. Seriously, what did you two kids want?”

Gwen held out her holopad, a picture of Max standing next to the scrawled human script in the window, “It’s been trying to communicate with David.”

“Oh...” sky blue eyes scanned the image, and the captain’s angular face collected itself quickly, “Well, I’m sure you two can handle it,” the confidence in his tone threatened to make him nod in agreement, even if David wasn’t entirely certain how he would go about accomplishing such a thing.

“Look, we need to know where the hell it came from and how to get it back there,” Gwen said, hackles rising slightly.

Mr Campbell looked surprised, “Send it back? After what I paid for it? That’s not good business, my canine friend.”

Oh.

Realistically, their beloved captain had gone out of his way so that they could welcome Max onto the Campbell crew. He could see the thinking behind his logic. Shipping the little creature back to its natural habitat was no doubt going to be a lengthy and bureaucratically involved process, but was ultimately the correct thing to do, right? Or was sending it back to a deathworld inhumane when they had so many lovely amenities onboard?

David laughed awkwardly to cut the tension, “I think what Gwen meant to say was that we’d love to have your professional opinion on what to do next.”

He was sure there would be a good middle ground somewhere.

Crossing his broad arms, the captain thought for a moment, “I don’t see how this changes anything, Davey. All I hear is that it can be better trained to our benefit.”

“That would be against several laws,” Gwen reminded, tiredly.

Mr Campbell glanced around the halls and leaned in, “Which is precisely why this little development, substantial or not, should be kept between the three of us,” he said, “What if you were wrong? Humans can’t really understand what’s going on anyway. I’m sure it will come to love our ship.”

Those words brought conflict home to David’s core. Mr Campbell always knew what was right for the crew, and for that he was a great captain. But as someone always striving to be a good *person*, David wasn’t entirely comfortable keeping a cub that smart locked up like that

until it liked the situation it was in. Judging by the look on her face, Gwen was feeling similar, but it couldn't be all bad right? Mr Campbell made decisions to protect them and the ship. If- no, *when* little Max caught his stride and realized what a wonderful environment they had here, everything would settle and become water under the bridge in the end.

Dragging a paw down her face, Gwen sighed, "I don't get paid enough for this."

"Oh, I'm sure I can throw in a little extra to help grease the wheel if you know what I mean," Mr Campbell offered, unfazed by her attitude. "Is that all? I should be returning to my duties."

"Yes, thank you so much, sir," David smiled, giving him a confident salute despite threads of uncertainty still lingering in his psyche. Even if Gwen glared at him for it, she didn't make any other demands, so it must have been a decent point to end the conversation.

The walk back was done in silence, but somehow they both resolved to head straight to Max's cell again. It felt right.

"I think it went well," he said cheerily when Gwen refused to follow him close to the entrance.

Her ears twitched, "We got hushed and bribed."

"I'm sure that's not how he meant to come across," David smiled, bumping his wrist to the sensor.

When he got inside, it became evident that Max had kept himself busy. The resin food tray appeared to have been broken against... something? Oh, the frame of his cot made sense. David shouldn't have left it in there. Max had looked up innocently just as they were using the sharp pieces to cut into and destroy the thin material of the water pouch.

"David..." The rest was in Human.

"Max," he began, "What you're doing doesn't look very safe. *Not. Safe. Max.*"

Visibly weighing their options, the cub went back to their task of making long strips of material.

Max didn't seem emotionally disturbed in that moment. Not break-something angry at all. The cub had given their full focus to the task of producing sharp things and using those sharp things to disassemble something else. It made no sense, held the looming threat of danger, and yet, David had the inclination to leave Max be. The human was sitting quietly and would definitely take poorly to their new things being taken away. Both items Max destroyed were completely unsalvageable, so all David could do was make a vow to remember not to leave Max with foodware unsupervised again.

The cub wouldn't lose anything they hadn't demonstrated harm with thus far. Simple as that.

Turning, he looked to see where Gwen would be outside, but her place at the observation window was empty.

That... was understandable. He put on his game face.

— — —

“David...” Max said, the picture of unrepentant, “Long time no see. Did you get a haircut?” His humour was truly wasted on this guy.

“Max,” the man began, saying a string of firm words, before reiterating the last chunk, << - ot. _afe. Max.>>

Oh hell no. He didn’t know what that meant, but being scolded like a dog was not happening.

Flipping him off, he went back to his task of cutting shit up to hopefully make better shit out of later, “Suck. A. Dick. David.”

Having crude weapons on hand was self-explanatory for its usefulness, but if he could somehow dismantle enough water thermos-pouch things to make a rope, Max could *really* get up to shit. Call him what you liked, but no one had even given him the chance to be resourceful since he lost all his shit on the first ship. There weren’t any exposed screws in the walls, comically large vents on the ceiling, or even places to hide and trick them into thinking he’d already escaped. The TV had prepared him for absolutely nothing!

He resisted the urge to turn on David just because he could. Breathe, Max. Actually, maybe he could scratch about one week’s worth of tallies into the wall to keep track of time passing in this shithole. The TV had prepared him for *one* thing.

“David,” he said, catching the man’s eyes instantly, “If you had to choose between being trapped in space or being trapped on Earth, what would you pick?”

As with all others he’d made, the question was useless and not ultimately meant to be answered. Max just thought... Okay, even if David didn’t understand, David was human. That alone was a bigger win than he was used to. More still, he was a human Max could call upon by name. It was a shitty start, he’ll give it that, but after having no words to use at all, ‘*David*’ had risen to the top of his dictionary. Two measly syllables got him attention and directed focus, so sue him if Max wore it out.

David just thought for a moment, and said something back in an inquisitive tone.

“Don’t answer my questions with questions,” Max muttered, embarrassed at himself for the display of weakness.

When ‘Gwen’ returned, she tapped on the window with an assortment of items in her hands (paws?). David rushed to let her in, and Max graciously didn’t attack him the minute his back was turned. He might have been at his wit’s end, but there was no way he’d be able to figure out what all that shit was if he blew it before they’d even gotten into his cell.

David accepted them, and after a short bout of conversation, closed the door and returned to Max. Blue tinged paper and an assortment of what he now recognized to be writing utensils sat in a cylindrical pencil holder.

“Oh,” Max snatched a sheet before he could even put it down, creasing the paper as David’s fingers tightened to keep the rest of the stack from spilling out onto the floor.

It wasn’t technology. Nothing that would be useful to break and repurpose. All he had in front of him is the opportunity for intended use... unless he could kill David with a space crayon, but the action seemed unfit for right now.

The blank canvas stared back at him, and for once, Max found it daunting.

Forgoing the brighter colours, he wrote his name in black ink at the top of the page. Next was his birthday, the names of his parents, the town he was born and raised in and the town he abducted and never returned to. Max knew all of these, but the paranoid thought lingered in his brain that he would forget it all. Words on a page wouldn’t freshen the impression of his mother’s laugh, but then again, he’d already been willing to forget that when he chose to run away. With any luck, he’d forget the sneer of his father’s hatred.

All the while, David watched on with fixated interest.

When Max had finished, the man reached down to take the paper from him, causing a bolt of irrational stress to shoot into Max’s body. Because, well, that belonged to him dammit! And the information was private! If David was dumb enough to think that it was free for the taking, then he surely wouldn’t mind the splintered edge of a meal tray scraping across his forearm. It was a *fair* retaliation.

Max clamped his hands over his ears at the resulting noise, “Hey! Don’t shriek like that so close to me, asshole!”

David just worriedly watched small beads of red blood begin to form where skin broke, “Max!”

He was not sorry and therefore didn’t need to explain himself, but Max pressed the paper close to his chest to telegraph the message regardless: “Mine.”

This time, with David a little farther away, he took another page.

Not being an artist made his efforts a little embarrassing. The circle he drew to represent Earth was lumpy and misshapen, but he tried to pretend it wasn’t. Drawing the continents didn’t come much easier, because he couldn’t exactly remember the shape at the top of North America, and his taper for the Gulf of Mexico was a little too wide and now South America looked squished because he’d wasted too much space trying to correct it.

Angry, Max scribbled the tricky planet in blue and green before labelling it “EARTH” in large lettering.

“Earth!” he held the paper up to David, giving it a noisy flick to punctuate the name, “Earth, dumbass. How do I get back?”

Starstruck, the man held his holopad up to the drawing and echoed him, “Earth.”

“Useless fuck.”

Drawing trees, houses, ugly stick people, and even uglier renditions of animals occupied him for a few hours while Max revelled in finally having something to do. Each time he was done, he’d show it to David, mentally note his reaction, and then sit on it so the man didn’t get any ideas about taking it away. His hand started to cramp, and Max knew he’d been pushing too hard when his writer’s callus looked bright red with abuse.

Sighing, Max turned to David, “Have you ever made a paper airplane or is everyone braindead in space?”

A confused string of words was sent back to him as Max began to fold and subsequently score along the edge of his next paper.

“Thought so,” he hummed. The papers he was given were square, so he had to take a bit off without fucking up and ripping the whole thing by accident.

Fold in top corners. Do it again. Fold down the middle. Fold out the front. It was a little more technical than that, but only barely. Max had easily given the sport of A4 aircrafts more attention than his studies and found the muscle memory easy to reproduce.

Once he was done, Max retreated to the far corner of the cell and threw it lightly for a maiden voyage. As expected, the airplane gently sailed to the other side of the room, bringing Max quiet satisfaction as well as David’s vocal disbelief.

Stooping down, David picked up his airplane. Before Max could shout and get the shard again, David just beamed at him and held it out. His voice sounded high and excited, no doubt prompting him to throw it again.

“Mine,” he huffed, having to come right up to the man in order to take it back.

David just smiled that thoughtless smile of his and gave it to him easily.

The novelty didn’t seem to wear off for the next few tries, either. Those eyes were glued to him and his makeshift papercraft each time it flew the meagre length of his enclosure. If anything, David was getting more kicks out of this than he was. Max glanced at the remaining few papers on the ground, and back to his airplane that was beginning to dent at the nose. Hmm.

Aiming for his head, Max threw his paper plane at David as hard as he could. It was supposed to hit him in the face, but the busted thing curved to knock him in the chest instead. David made a startled sound, but remained uninjured and *still* picked it up to give it back to Max. Even if he threw it at him.

“Keep it,” Max sniffed, going back to the papers to make himself a newer, better one. David didn’t seem to get it at first, but once Max’s new plane began to take shape and he’d made enough dismissive motions, David held the plane closer to his chest.

He pointedly ignored the fact that the man looked like he was gonna cry.

— — —

David was going to cry.

Stars, *Gwen* was going to cry when she learned about what she'd missed while returning to her usual duties.

For the first time he'd seen, Max was *playing with toys*. They took to the stationery immediately, drawing pictures of strange things and wonky beings. It was hard to get a good look at the depictions when Max was so territorial (he may have received a minor injury discovering that), but they must have been important considering the cub labelled everything in that same rickety text. All of it felt diligent. No boredom, no pacing, no looking at David with misplaced rage. Just creating in their own little world.

"Earth," the human announced, repeating the emphasized word at the end of their sentence.

The drawing was blue and green, kept inside a vague marble. He knew his window to view it was short, so he quickly stole a photo and tried to appease their sudden enthusiasm.

Hold on-

"Earth," he breathed.

That was a planet.

Somehow, some way, they knew what their home looked like from outer space.

The implications of that were... honestly terrifying no matter how you sliced it. Had they shown Max? Making the human cub visually understand the departure as things faded into the distance and became obscured by the atmosphere must have been awful. In that case, was '*Earth*' just the word for home, or a place? Alternatively, had humans gotten into space some other way? David had no idea how they could pass down the image of their planet through primitive means, but maybe those drawings were exactly how they did.

And then they started messing with the paper. At first, it seemed like the passive human need to destroy had outweighed their interest in drawing when the side strip was folded and torn off. But it was more calculated than that. There was always more. Apparently satisfied with the new shape, the cub began to bend the paper and crease it again and again until pieces stuck out... but symmetrically.

Max threw it across the room, and only then did David understand that they made a miniature ship of their own.

"Stars..." David felt at a loss for words, picking up the ship excitedly.

The cub snatched it out of his hands, barking something at him before retreating to the other side of the room again to throw it again and again.

That was... That was a toy. A deathworlder was given stationery and used it to make a replica of a ship. Who could have *possibly* taught that to them? And why would the human bother remembering when it had no use for war or hunting? Actually... Maybe a tool like that could lure in avian species? But humans had no paper!

“What have you seen?” David mused, wondering for the umpteenth time as Max repetitively flew their creation.

Once the ship began to fly poorly, the cub grew irritable at the lack of success. It was only a matter of time before it was hurled at David, but this was one of the preferable things to have been thrown at him so far. Paper made a light impact on his vest, drifting a little as it fell to the ground.

“Aw, you don’t mean that,” David tutted, grabbing it, “Soon you’ll be mad at me for picking this up because it’s yours.”

The human returned to the pile of papers with little more than a sideways glance at him.

He held out the small ship. Selfishly, he wanted the cub to come close enough to take it from him again, “Come on, Max,” he coaxed, gently, “You don’t like me holding this, remember?”

Max made a familiar tear in the page. Then the cub flicked their hand at him a few times.

The beginnings of a new ship. They didn’t want the old one.

Reasonably, Max only gave it to him because it didn’t work anymore. But nothing made them do it. The cub could very well have added it to the pile of drawings and attacked David if he dared to try and take it, but they didn’t. After spending as much time with the human as he had, something in him knew that this was as close to a gift as a human was possibly capable of producing.

David’s throat felt tight with emotion, “You don’t hate me.”

Maybe Max didn’t necessarily *like* him. Maybe they didn’t even *have* the empathy for that. But... If humans could speak, and write, and understand the planet and the ground were one and the same, then maybe, just maybe, they could understand that David wasn’t trying to antagonize them. If not appreciation, then acknowledgement.

In the form of a small paper ship.

Okay, he cried a little.

Pack bond with each other, damnit. You can't stop this. It's already happening

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Debated posting this one but as long as y'all know it's non-romantic slice of life we're chill

Gwen really did have a field day with all of Max's emerging behaviours.

A daunting field day, but Gwen would certainly pull through her feelings of impending legal dread to celebrate how special Max was eventually. Each new thing they learned, while unexpected and therefore without clear-cut plans of action, helped them understand a bit more about their newest little friend.

For the next string of days, Max was given as much paper as the cub wanted. The colours had to be limited to when David was supervising the room, but even then he'd seen Max stash a couple and couldn't bring himself to upturn the cot and take them back. Beyond that, each mealtime was accompanied by an additional shallow dish of water (and a durable one, thank you very much). It was a low risk idea considering Max could always just drink it alongside his water pouch, but surprisingly, the human was content to stick their hands in it and actually wash them!

Until today, apparently.

"Does it taste funny?" he asked, pointing animatedly to both items of water that Max had completely ignored in favour of quickly inhaling their dinner. The ones from breakfast and lunch were still there, too, which had begun to concern him.

Actually, worrying about the endearing little fella had also become something of a new normal to him, but that was neither here nor there.

Meeting his eyes, Max grabbed a water pouch and took a long, noisy sip. Then they put it back and got on with finishing up the food.

"I really hope that doesn't mean you're sick," he sighed, "Human biology makes me react a little funny to some things, so I can only imagine how tough it could be to get you a safe dosage."

Max didn't respond in anything comprehensible, and shortly thereafter stood with a look of resignation and mounting tension. By now he could see the shift clear as day. Feel it in the air, even. The cub's eye contact grew heavier through the furrow of their brow and the narrowing of bright eyes into something more dangerous. David had no idea what made the

previously happy camper go into... territorialism? What was this? Did he do something wrong?

“What’s happening, bud?”

Slightly, the cub lifted their hand. They made that same flicking motion from days prior with the plane.

“I don’t know what that means,” David lamented, combing through as much context as he could, “Is that... go away?”

The cub approached and shoved him. Once. Just lightly.

A warning.

“Buddy, if something’s wrong you have to find some way to tell me,” David fretted, “Is it the water? Is the water bad?”

He skirted around the young human, reaching down to grab one of the washing pans, when a shout froze him in place.

Max shook their head, vehemently. It was an angry tick of theirs. Max retrieved one of the resin shards from a pocket in their garbs and brandished it menacingly, <<Mine.>>

He knew what that sound meant by now.

“Okay... That’s fine, I won’t take it from you, Max,” he spoke softly, unwilling to instigate bigger issues than the one that already appeared out of thin air. He put the pan down, and the weapon was lowered accordingly.

Max made the flicking motion again, but more insistent. It incorporated both hands now, and grew bigger and more exaggerated to encompass the arms when David didn’t move fast enough. He was being directed, no *ushered* towards the door.

“Um...”

It’s not like this was completely new. Despite the human's general tolerance of him in their space (a victory he did not take lightly), there had been plenty of times when Max decided to eat violence for breakfast and feel the need to baselessly attack and force him away. But most of that was earlier. He’d like to think they’d come to some form of mutual understanding since then. Just his being there was surely more enriching than an empty cell... but was part of that mutual understanding giving Max space when requested? Of course.

Just... “I really don’t know if you’re not feeling good. I’m worried, kiddo.”

Max charged, and he regretfully had to lock a hand around their wrist to keep from getting cut.

— — —
“I need-” he swung at the man, “Some goddamn-” it was unfortunately stopped, “Privacy!”

David looked deeply conflicted, but continued to manhandle him into dropping his makeshift knife. Like a fucking jerk.

There was no way in hell he was going to let David coo and take pictures of what Max was trying to accomplish. Getting clean was hard enough when all he could spare was enough to dampen a section of cloth. Before his water became more consistent, Max hadn't even been able to do marginally effective haircare, but now he wanted to see how much he could knock out with a day's worth of liquid. The thirst came secondary when he knew there was going to be more. Probably. Max had to remind himself that the pang of uncertainty was just hard living fucking with his head. There *would* be more.

“Get out!” he hissed, landing a half-decent kick to David's stomach to make the man yelp.

Max typically did anything he needed to at night once David had left to go sleep or something, but being dehydrated made him irritable and he didn't want to feel itchy and gross to this extent longer than he had to. David would usually leave soon enough after dinner, so Max had made the incorrect assumption that he would mind his business if directed to do so. He'd used the space equivalent of manners, too!

David held him upside down by the ankle, and Max tried to scratch the shit out of his legs before he was held at an arm's length.

“How can you even do *that?*” he snapped, patronized by David's generally woeful expression, “You're too fucking thin to be that strong.”

Gently, Max was lowered onto the cot so that he wouldn't hurt himself on the floor.

“No! You're not fucking putting me to bed!”

As always, David looked panicked. Confused in the way that Max could tell the man thought this was uncalled for.

If this truly *was* uncalled for, then Max would have been given access to at least a fucking shower in this place. For another human, David seemed to miss a lot of important points regarding general decency in accommodations. He couldn't be a nice guy crippled by the language barrier if he didn't make the connection that people had to fucking *bathe*, dipshit.

Finally, he watched David concede. As in, hurriedly call someone (let's be honest, it was Gwen. That was the only other alien he'd seen there).

“What, gonna call your boss?” Max snapped, “Look, I like dogs but if you think she's going to stop me you're dead wrong. You should save yourself the time and *fuck. Off.*”

The man spoke despairingly into the device, and Max was rocked with another feeling of bitterness over the whole ordeal. This wasn't a hard thing to understand. Max was sure of it. David was just fucking stupid, and that meant that Max was alone on this forsaken place because he wouldn't be getting real help anytime soon. If he wanted something, he'd have to grab it until the reasoning could be worked into that hollow space between David's ears.

"Max," came up many times in the sentence, and by now he was pretty sure he understood <<Water>> in the alien language, too.

And with enough caterwauling, the mirror went clear again to reveal the wolfish woman, looking a little out of breath. She didn't even tell shit for brains that he had it all twisted, and now *she* was watching him too. There was no winning!

"God, you know what? Just-" he grit his teeth, ripping open a water pouch, "Whatever!"

Fully clothed, Max dumped it onto his head. His oily hair wasn't exactly penetrable without soap, so most of it wound up on his face or down his hoodie. Grabbing the next one, he tilted his head slightly, so the water had to at least travel through some of his roots to comply with the artificial gravity. Scrubbing at it only seemed to transfer that greasy feeling to his hands, but Max pressed on and tried to catch the drips in the water pans so he could use them more than once.

"Max?"

He looked up, black unruly curls plastered to his face, "David."

Gwen must've finally given her two cents through that hollopod of theirs, because the man's expression shifted completely, morphing from confused shock to creeping understanding.

"Yeah," he spat, trying to recall the correct tone for his next word, <<Water>>

With a small 'eep' noise, David and Gwen had another rapidly paced conversation about him while he was still in the fucking room. They couldn't easily distract him from his long awaited hair wash, so Max just worked his way through the small stash until all of them were empty and the pans looked too iffy to put through his scalp again.

He kicked it over, soaking David's shoes as a petty act of rage.

<<Max water>> the man responded in alien with a wince.

"I'm not a dog," he groaned, "Max kick your teeth in."

David tentatively reached for him, so Max took a step back.

"Fuck off."

<<Max>> was all he could parse. David reached for him again.

Instead of whatever the fuck was happening, Max stormed over to where Gwen was watching them and beat his fist twice against the glass, <<Water?>> he asked, pointing to the door of

the cell.

She made a choked sound through David's device, and the man tried to take his wrist again with a wince while affirming, <<Max water.>>

Okay. So this was unusual. But not so weird that he knew nothing. He was decently sure that they were actually offering to take him out of the cell. Which hadn't happened thus far no matter how much he tried to claw his way to freedom. Had Max known doing this would make them so willing to break that rule, he would have done so earlier. It had something to do with water, and since it involved having to physically go out, he really hoped it was somewhere to get clean.

The final time the man reached for him, Max begrudgingly allowed it. If that was his ticket out, then he could always escape later. That wasn't to say letting someone have a hold on him was easy. David's firm but gentle grip on him made Max mindful of how dangerous it could be if that changed. Having his wrist sprained for insubordination was a real threat on his old ships.

His breath caught when the door slid open with a hiss.

"I guess we're doing this, then."

— — —

"We should've thought of this sooner," Gwen sighed, keeping a generous distance between herself and David's struggling captive.

As soon as Max had breached the door, a second wind seemed to flow through the cub. Efforts to bite their way to freedom were ramped back up as David tried to bring them further down the hall towards the facilities. It was a slow going process, but David tried to reiterate that they were going to a place with more. water. Max.

He winced at Gwen's words, but recovered quickly, "But we figured it out!"

"And by that you mean the human gave up."

Okay, so what they did know was that humans were turning out to be a more cleanly species than previously realized. Another thing that was on absolutely zero informative articles, but he digressed. Putting out the washing pans Gwen suggested actually did result in seeing some preening. Max stopped trying to get dirt off onto their pants and used the dishes as intended, so he thought they'd met the mark for that area.

It took Gwen getting down there and Max's sudden directness to figure out he was wrong.

"Sorry about that, buddy," David apologized to the currently tired human he was pulling along beside him, "I didn't know it was a secretive thing."

“Or any predator not wanting to be caught distracted and vulnerable.”

Max had been very insistent that David left, even if it was only for a few packs of water to the long, melanated hair on top of their head. Concepts of modesty and how they applied were different between species, and for whatever reason, Max had decided they weren't comfortable getting clean with another human in the room. Was it cultural? Instinctual? Trauma-based? He didn't know, and didn't think he'd find out anytime soon.

Of all the things Max demonstrated desire for, it wasn't David's immediate injury, or escape, or generally something unsafe, so it wasn't a hard thing to hash out a plan with Gwen's help. The cub, or David himself for that matter, wasn't given free rein of the ship. That meant that the only shower they could use was the nondescript one located not too far from his sleeping quarters.

“What if they drown under the faucet somehow?” David asked anxiously.

Even if it didn't do as good of a job, they were encouraged to use the laser sanitizers to cut down on resource consumption. Could they teach Max to trust it? Although it may be hard considering how different it was from how Max seemed to want to get clean.

“David, leave it alone,” she sighed, leading the way. “Didn't you yourself say that Max had done everything in their power to make you leave? If anything, the one drowning under that faucet is going to be you.”

“Fine,” he conceded, watching Max's eyes drink in each new hallway with a look of calculation that David was getting better at identifying, “You're a tough cookie, so I'm sure you'll be alright.”

The room was simple in construction. Ones like it existed in more general areas of the ship, but this was not meant to be communal and only housed a single faucet. The room was coated in a hydrophobic surface to protect against escaped moisture and sloped slightly downwards towards a drain that was covered with fine mesh. On the far end sat a touchscreen to control the water, with a simple metallic fixture to control the spray sitting above it. A non-toxic cleaning agent was mixed into the shower reserves for less dexterous species, and David could more or less trust Max wouldn't get sick if they tried to drink it.

“*Da-vid*,” Max tugged at their restricted arm yet again.

“Okay, Max,” he conceded, letting go and quickly stepping towards the door.

There was no mad rush for escape when David opened it to leave. If anything, Max had gone the opposite direction and stepped closer to the showerhead. Not a trace of separation anxiety, they simply watched him expectantly to ensure he was truly gone.

“Did it combust into flames?” Gwen asked, scrolling through her device.

He took up the opposite post, “No, Max seems fine.”

She just shrugged, “Now we wait, I guess.”

And they did.

The nighttime cycle lights had just barely come on when David heard the door reject an unauthorized user. After that came a small, barely audible knock.

As soon as the seal cracked, hot air rushed out into the hall accompanied by the sensation of steam. Max seemed nonchalant, but visibly looked... healthier? Was there seriously that much dirt on the cub? Even the clothing they wore seemed to be brighter. David's heart ached to know how the flower and wood scouts had treated the little one, but right now everyone had to get to sleep.

"Alright, this has spent enough of my free time," she sighed, "Let's get that thing back in containment before it decides to eat anyone."

Max just looked affronted at the cold air, but their bloodlust seemed to have been washed away along with the dust. He would have almost trusted the cub to follow him untethered, but Max's confident walk in the opposite direction of his cell had David catching them by the fabric (possibly a hood?) on the back of their damp clothes with a fond sigh.

Back in the cell, Max completely ignored him in favour of collapsing on their cot. The human pulled up the fabric of their sheet until only the topmost portion of their face peeked out. Through sleepy eyes, Max lazily focused on him, and one single hand emerged from the covers to make that shooing motion once more.

David's silent adoration welled up into a small smile, "Goodnight to you too, Max."

While the little human had made it seem so easy, David had a hard time settling into bed that night. No one had to tell him that he had a bleeding heart (although Gwen frequently did), and just as he knew it would, the guilt found him. It bore into his chest past his genetically mutated ribs and settled into an ache below his sternum.

From now on, he vowed to treat Max like they were completely aware.

Did Max attack him today? Yes, but not baselessly. And that made all the difference. He... Well- um, David had been moving forward from the position that Max's aggressive responses to life were misguided. That it was a sign of instinct winning over logical and empathic thought. The cub repetitively ignored the reality of its safe, non-hostile environment to be unruly and scornful of David.

But after today it was getting harder and harder not to take a step outside of himself. Because what he saw back there? Was a child. And a brilliant one at that.

Max had entered the Campbell crew in a box.

The child was given no toys, but only strange foods and strange people. The poor thing was probably just confused and dysregulated- which he found completely understandable given the circumstances.

"I'm so sorry, Max."

David felt the wave of failure rain down on him as he watched the small glowing clock beside the bed and still found nothing in him willing to close his eyes.

Maybe he did his best with what he knew about, but he refused to let that be an excuse. Everything Max had gained so far was because the cub had struggled. They didn't get properly introduced or spoken to until they did it themselves. Max didn't get paper until they got fed up enough to write in window fog. Had no way of easily washing their hands or body until their alternate attempts could be recognized for what it was.

That wasn't something he was going to excuse himself for as Max's caretaker.

Deep breathes, David.

Even when stars were swallowed up by black holes, there was a moment of light at the event horizon.

This just meant he got the *opportunity* to do better. Understanding what went wrong and changing strategy was a good thing no matter how much it wreaked havoc on his heart. Tomorrow, things would be better. He'd find out what Max needed before they felt threatened into violence. And both of them would flourish.

Hopefully.

— — —

Max blinked, "Seriously?"

For some reason unknown to him, David came in the next morning with two large boxes stacked on top of each other. They nearly covered his face, and the man blindly closed the door behind him with an elbow while Max tried to rub the sleep from the corners of his eyes.

Scalding hot water from the shower had been great for his muscle tension, but there this dumbass went and brought it all back again.

"David!" Max called, indignantly, "The fuck are you doing?"

With far too much energy, the man set the boxes down in one corner of the cell with a delighted, "Max!"

Being as bored as he was, Max didn't immediately object or try to send David right back out again. When something as simple as that could get him curious, Max knew that his attention span must have been healing from the television. But curiosity also brought a healthy dose of caution when interacting with a potential trap. He'd allow the new things in his space for now, at least, but Max was already gearing up in case he had to take a stand.

Removing the acrylic lid from the first box, David pulled out... Green cloth? No, it was the shirt to their uniform. Following it came another identical shirt, a pair of brown pants, and a blue blanket of medium thickness.

“Are you camping here, dude? Seriously?”

Speaking his own tongue, David grinned and rattled on as he attempted to coax Max towards the textiles.

“I’m not sure you noticed,” he huffed, stomping over to grab a pair of pants and hold them at his waist, “But we aren’t the same height. So these better not be for me.”

David inspected how the ends of the pants draped onto the floor with a budding amount of understanding, and reached over to roll up the legs a few times.

“Yeah, except I’d need a belt for that, dumbass.”

Undeterred, David cracked open the second box and finally presented Max with something that he’d actually needed. What was clearly a black comb emerged as the first item. While he was under no illusions that it would tame his hair painlessly, it was a good start, so Max snatched it from David’s loose grip before he could even put it down. As expected, it got stopped by a painful tangle almost instantly, so he pocketed it for the time being.

Then came a smaller case which contained something he couldn’t immediately identify. It was a crescent shaped object of seemingly plastic (?) origin and David held up the object to mime biting it as a demonstration. Like a mouthguard, or well, a mouth something.

Hold the goddamn phone.

“Did you seriously just give me a teether? Where did you even get one of these in space?” Max asked, shocked enough to accept it when David held it out.

He had half the mind to throw it at him, because Max didn’t fucking bite because his teeth hurt, asshole. Self defence by any means meant he was just using the weapons evolution provided because only the strong survived. It wasn’t a fucking recreational activity. It was a threat.

Because David hadn’t been entirely useless this morning, Max set aside his plans of dropping the teether into the toilet in exchange for putting it down and ignoring it completely.

Disappointed, but not angry, the man emptied the last of the box out to show that it had been filled with more blankets and packaged... food? Oh, okay he could work with that. When Max took it, the packaging didn’t crinkle, but instead felt almost soft. It tore open easily enough and inside he found small, round pellets. They weren’t in terrifically bright colours, but maybe red 40 wasn’t a thing this deep in space.

Throwing caution to the wind, he ate one.

And it was sweet.

Not like the nearly painful taste of malic acid, but Max would take what he could get. Candy was candy, even if this wouldn't make his tongue bleed like that one time he emptied an entire bag of sour Skittles. It had been ages since he'd tasted anything close to sucrose, and Max had put a fistful in his mouth as soon as he realized what it was.

"Max," David looked elated, but his tone for the rest of the words that spilled out of him read as a warning not to eat it too quickly.

Max flipped him off and opened another one.

While he was eating (read: devouring), David stole all his old bedding and put it in one of the newly empty boxes. Max allowed it under a distracted, but not absent watch to make sure David didn't touch any of his drawings or the makeshift weapons he'd put under the lumpy mattress. In his eyes, the trade was fair, since David had given him new stuff and there really wasn't any way Max could do his own laundry in captivity.

"I don't know what's gotten into you," he said, pleasantly sick on space candy, "But we might actually get somewhere with this, David."

David's never had a nosebleed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Max was going to blow this popsicle stand if it was the last thing he did.

Don't get him wrong, David was scoring himself some basic human rights points as of late, but he was still in a fucking box all the damn time. Escape was easier said than done, since usually the other man was there to do whatever David did when he worked away on that holographic tablet of his. Max knew that something about the technology only responded to David and not him. He could make all the same motions and not be given a lick of progress to show for it.

Technically, Max had a shank. He could try and separate David's hand from the rest of him to open the door, but a shattered food tray was a far cry from a bone saw... and David probably had his reservations around surprise amputation. The rope he made could tie him up, but really Max had only been using it to make rock slings to whip his full water pouches at David...

Things were a lot easier while the bloodlust was still hot.

Max looked up from his brainstorming chart to the man who was pleasantly oblivious beside him.

Noticing his attention, David smiled, saying something in a soft tone.

David was... Okay, he wasn't *that* bad.

The aliens before him had far less hang ups on physical assault and attempted starvation *and* drugging- So really, David was in the lead. It was getting harder to work up the part inside of him that genuinely wanted to see his body drop. The fact that David was actually human helped, because obviously something in the brain was supposed to stop you from hurting people. But back when he got the upper hand on Fartz or Yellow? No, Max had genuinely lost no sleep over nearly killing either of them (if anything, *nearly* wasn't good enough). David was different.

Staring down at his small list of things to try once David left, Max set it aside for the time being.

"Guess I can't do much with you here," he muttered, striding up to him, "But let it be known that you are at my mercy."

David cooed.

"Fucker."

Stepping away, Max looked for something to fill the time. Paper airplanes? Flown. Hair? Not brushed out per se, but sort of possibly dealt with for the time being. All his colours were with Gwen until she could come back with them, and even then, he was running out of things to draw. Honestly, if the space food didn't kill him, at this rate the boredom would. It gnawed away at his patience until he felt like snapping.

The teether sat innocently on the floor.

"Is this even clean?" Scrutinizing it, Max stalked over to his cot to waste some of his water stash to douse it and prove a point, "I bet I could crack this thing if I tried hard enough."

David made some vaguely encouraging sounds, so Max gave it a cursory cleaning and popped it in his mouth to see what the fuss was about.

Like a flashbang, the damn thing lit up like the Fourth of July when he bit down.

What the fuck?

With a strangled noise, he threw it across the room and coincidentally at David, who had developed the instinctual ability to catch things out of the air before they could hit him by now.

"Are you out of your fucking-" Max paused. The carpet feeling on his teeth was gone.

Oh.

A toothbrush.

Max flopped down into a cross legged seat, tugging at his hair in exasperation as the adrenaline dissipated, "How was I supposed to know that? Now you're gonna think I have weird dentistry hang ups."

With a sigh, he graciously allowed David to give the damn thing back to him and left it the dish it came with for now. Eyeing it, he wondered if it was worth breaking to see if it would finally, finally be the screw up that gained him his freedom... Then again, it seemed particularly useless for anything else, and he *did* need a way to clean his teeth.

Movement in his peripheral vision.

"Gwen's here," he said, still looking at the device with suspicion.

Recognizing the name, David's head snapped up. And, sure enough, "Gwen!"

These days, she was either there to keep David company while he was stuck on babysitting duty, or it was time for his only taste of freedom again. Judging by the way Gwen didn't immediately call him on the little holopad thingy, Max could hold out hope for the latter.

"Max," David said, slowly, <<Max water.>>

Getting up, he stood by the door in preparation for an opening to slip through unhindered, <<Water.>> he mimicked.

As was common, David was infuriatingly good at keeping track of him at all times. The hallways were clean, lit, and liminal in feel. So far, he only knew the way to the shower because that was the only place they'd been. If Max could have just a moment to break away, he might be able to get somewhere substantial enough to wreak havoc. Why was it that the only other human in the galaxy was that lanky son of a bitch? Someone shorter and rounder might have given Max a leg up.

In general, it was an uneventful affair. The water was warm, the door wouldn't let him work it, and Max found himself uncomfortably damp but generally better off than he was. Besides, recycled spaceship air was always dry as shit, so the hoodie would be fine soon enough without having to make a fool of himself and try David's hand-me-downs.

His inner nose tickled on the way back to his cell.

Without thinking, Max lifted the back of his free hand to press down on it. David was gripping the other, and as funny as it would be to wipe a booger on him, Max finally felt clean. His knuckle wiggled the cartilage to make it go away, and at the same moment, he felt the telltale pain of something splitting up there.

It stung.

"Ah, shit."

A warm feeling slowly travelled down his nostril, and it wasn't long until Max felt the blood creep towards his top lip. Exasperated, he touched it with his finger on the odd chance he could have a runny nose, but it came away a bright, telling red. Max hardly bled as often as those who'd wronged him, but seeing that he was still human- *none of those strange other colours underneath*- was reassuring now and then.

David screamed a shrill note that echoed through the hallway.

"Jesus fucking christ, man!" Obviously, Max was fucking startled by the loud, girlish noise. He leaned away from him, weary in case his ears had to suffer again soon.

This appeared to be the wrong course of action. "Gwen! *Gwen!*" David let go of his wrist just long enough to hold both sides of Max's face. The green eyes looking him over were wide and frantic.

Gwen appeared at his side, and instead of telling him he was overreacting or whatever it was she did to make him stop shrieking usually, her eyes went big too. Clawed hands tightened, and she quickly began fishing through her uniform to find her device. The alien conversation they made was shrill and panicked.

"You are both useless," he informed, reaching up to wipe his *still dripping* nose, but David seized the hand before it could make contact with another worried sentence.

Lovely. It was in his mouth now.

With nothing to lose, Max licked the blood just to hear David squeak.

— — —

“Oh my stars, they’re *dying*. ”

“It could just be injured!” Gwen pawed through as many articles relevant to human biology as she could.

Blood. Red, human blood made a dark trail against the cub’s warm-toned skin. The nose was for breathing and smelling, two functions that required a clear passage. He’d never seen this happen before. Even with his mixed biology, *David’s* nose never bled unless he was hit hard enough to warrant an injury to his *primary airway*. This was bad. This was really bad.

“What if their brain is leaking out!”

“Then we’re fucking screwed, okay?” she snapped, “Just give me a second!”

The human, for all of their explosive reactions and skepticism towards everything they encountered, was shockingly unfazed. Max seemed vaguely annoyed, but when were they not? They acted like a grave injury was more commonplace than a tooth cleaner. Seriously? This ‘Earth’ was a place David never wanted to visit.

Tilting their head this way and that with his hands, he felt the panic climbing with every drip of blood from their chin, “It’s okay, kiddo! Everything is going to be a-okay!”

Max spoke to him sharply while trying to recoil, but the flashes of teeth he could catch glimpses of were stained with red and David couldn’t bring himself to release them. If anything, his pulse only quickened with dread at the thought. Children in pain needed comfort, deathworlders or not! David only pulled the little one closer at the next affronted sound they made. It was not quite a hug with the amount of enraged flailing going on, but David tactically tucked Max’s chin over his shoulder to limit most of the biting.

“Gwen, *please* tell me you have something,” he looked at her helplessly. Max was bleeding for seemingly no reason and there was nothing he could do about it.

“Not yet, so shut up,” The holographic display had expanded now, showing several pages at once. She glanced at all of them with no apparent luck.

“What if we’re running out of time?” he squeaked, feeling Max give up their assault to take a breath. There were a lot of what ifs he *really* shouldn’t think about right now, “You’re just a cub and you’re away from your species and- and-”

“David I swear to the stars if you start crying-”

“Too late,” he sniffled, pulling back from the hug to make sure Max’s situation had not miraculously taken a nose dive in the last two minutes.

The cub frowned at him, blood smeared on their chin from where it must have pooled at David’s shoulder. Max’s soft face and curly hair was offset by the sharp eyes of a predator and the weight of all that anger. In the past, Gwen once told him that he’d developed red blood after his mutation because there was iron inside. It made the fact that Max was currently dripping metal out of their face all the more concerning.

Max tried to shove him away.

Contrastingly, David snatched them closer again, “Please just know I’m sorry!”

“David!” Gwen snapped, “For fuck’s sake, leave it alone. It can’t understand you, and an injured human can easily become a desperate one.”

“But they’re just little!”

“And drawing so much attention to their vulnerability is going to stress it out,” she shot back, “Imagine what you get when you show weakness in a pack of humans.”

David’s heart stilled.

Was that why Max was acting so calm? Because they thought David would get frenzied if he saw them hurt? Max might’ve established himself as the meanest human, but David had more or less tried to reinforce the fact that he was in charge and-

“Oh no,” David winced at the blunt fingernails trying to claw their way away from him, “No, no, no- Max, I’m not a threat!”

Gwen made a long groan.

The cub was adamant about not being restrained any longer, and David was just as adamant about caring for the poor thing. Tooth and nail had somehow become normal for him, so it wasn’t a tough decision. The resulting struggle, it seemed, had broken down his crew buddy’s last vestige of patience.

“That’s it!” she snapped, closing her pad, “Max is very clearly still alive and nothing in here is helpful, so we’ll just have to do what we can.”

That wasn’t what he wanted to hear. She always had an answer, “But-”

“*David*,” she stressed, “What you are going to do is go and get medical supplies. I will stay with tons-of-fun.”

Something in him bristled, “I’m not leaving.”

“You are,” Gwen was usually terrified of the human, but held out a paw for Max regardless, “You will take five fucking minutes to calm down,” her eyes darted over the cub uncertainly, “But come back before it eats me.”

— — —

For some fucking reason, the adults were freaking the hell out over a nosebleed.

At first, it was kind of funny, then it got annoying, and now? After David tearfully left him with Gwen of all people, Max was starting to get kind of concerned.

“I’m not actually hurt, right?”

All signs pointed to this just being a nosebleed. David probably got them all the time if he lived here... but he sure as hell didn’t act like it. And okay, Gwen probably wouldn’t know human stuff, and the man *was* an idiot, but on the off chance that there was some terrible neurotoxin loose in the building with this kind of side effect, he wasn’t looking forward to finding out.

“Oh yes, David, leave me with the furry since I need a babysitter,” Max rolled his eyes at the completely tense wolf-person-alien thing. “Answer me. Am I fucked?”

Gwen muttered, half her words a whine as she physically distanced herself from Max as much as she could while still having a hold on him.

“Why do you have this job if you clearly hate kids?” he asked her, honestly.

Reviewing his situation, Max realized David might’ve really fucked up here. Sure, his nose was bleeding, but he did feel fine. Even if there was some unknown disease that could be cured by sitting tight and waiting for him to come back, that had to be a slim chance, right? But he was mostly sure it was fine. Mostly.

And he was still in the hall.

“Ugh, fuck it,” Max groaned, the anger in his voice making Gwen’s hackles raise instinctively, “I was already going to die in this shithole eventually, and you never liked me anyway, so it’s not like I’m burning bridges there.”

This was the perfect opportunity to split and run, and there was no way he’d squander it over something as stupid as some dry skin. The decision had already been made the moment they decided to leave him here with inadequate surveillance in an unsecured location. Just that thought alone had energy dumping into his system as the fight or flight signals thrummed at a higher frequency.

Right now Gwen had her hand on his wrist, but her extension meant that Max could do, well...

“This is gonna be really gross,” he prefaced, giving full warning.

Max spit at Gwen and aimed high. There was not *not* blood in there, but it worked to his benefit with how hard she flinched away- grip loosening with the instinctual urge to wipe it off. Using his free hand to pry open her paw, Max ignored Gwen's disgusted alien cursing, and took off in the opposite direction of his cell.

Loathing his short legs, he let the adrenaline fuel him and focused hard on taking as many turns as possible. If she was anything like the dogs back on earth, she'd be able to track him down, but Max buried his nose in the damp sleeve of his hoodie and tried not to let the blood get on the floor and give him away. He needed *distance* at the very least.

As he sprinted for his life, Max reaffirmed his decision to hate space-age decoration. All the doors were completely flush with the walls, no handles, just more tech bullshit on the sides to get in. What he wouldn't give for a window made of normal glass panes or the thin drywall of corporate America. Didn't these aliens know how to cut corners in the name of capitalistic greed?

"Out of the fucking way!" he called, seeing an alien that was neither David nor Gwen.

The silver grizzly bear looking motherfucker, whatever it was, didn't move. It just stood there in the open doorway, gaping at him slightly. While Max didn't quite like the look of how fucking big it was, there was no other option but forward. Using the alien's wide stance to his advantage, Max dropped low and *slid* through to the exit.

Springing back up to his feet again, Max surveilled his surroundings and-

"You've got to be shitting me."

Eyes. Freaky, alien, weird as fuck eyes stared back at him in multiple sets. This place was a large, rectangular room that served as a connector between at least four hallways. It was populated with tables and chairs, and now terrified aliens. They all seemed to be in that same dumb uniform with the green top and Max felt the increasingly pressing urge to scream in frustration. He settled for dropping into a ready stance, heaving with exertion as he grappled for what to do.

Disrupting the sudden silence, a fat drop of his blood fell to the ground with a barely audible *splat*.

And then it all went to hell.

One of the aliens screamed, spindly sets of arms raising in a threat display. Behind him, he heard something move and belatedly realized that the burly alien hadn't gone anywhere. The only thing that kept him out of those fucking paws for hands was pure instinct and a good dodge.

He picked a direction with the weakest looking aliens in the way and barreled on forward without so much as a thought to slow him down. Weaker translated to shorter and thinner in his mind, but his realistic odds of beating them didn't matter when the creatures all but leaped out of his warpath and made way.

Fuck this spaceship. Fuck the aliens. And fuck his parents for birthing him into a reality where any of this was possible.

Each step echoed loudly, his elevated heartbeat forcing more blood up into his brain and, unfortunately, out through his nose. But exhaustion was catching up to him, and no apparent cockpit had shown up, so he couldn't very well start trying to crash this massive space cruiser. Now that he was slowing down and back in an area with no population, Max found himself caught off guard by the sight of countless stars in one of the few real windows he'd been flying past beforehand.

For such a vast and boundless thing, the greater universe really had a way of making him feel like the walls were closing in on him.

He pressed onward.

A chittering, clicking noise of fear bubbled out of a lone alien. Short and woolly with curly ginger hair and wide blue eyes. As small as it was, it still had a couple inches on him, so Max bared his teeth and watched as it shrank back towards the wall.

Spending so long inside the cell had fucked over his endurance for cardio. The lightheadedness creeping in around the corners promised failure if he kept pushing it like he was now. The distant footsteps weren't getting any quieter the longer he stood there.

Okay, think Max, *think*.

He stalked towards the newest alien, cracking his knuckles, "You can probably open doors, right?" There was an access panel just to their left, and the thing clearly wasn't faster than him.

It slowly began inching away.

Max didn't care. You'd think he had tried to dismember it with how loudly the alien yelped when he grabbed it by the arm. There didn't seem to be any fight in the creature at all. Sure, it started screaming bloody murder, but it didn't smack him off once while Max continuously shoved where its wrist was supposed to be against the reader.

It took him a couple of times, okay? "Why don't you have bones!" Max hissed, dragging the terrified creature in with him once the door slid open with a cheerful sound.

Decently sure that it stood no chance against him, Max grabbed the alien as both a hostage and a precaution so it didn't snitch on him immediately. The room he'd just broken into wasn't anything fancy. There was a desk, some shelves, and a picture of an unknown chemical compound on the wall.

"Look, I'm just as pleased about this as you are," he dragged a hand down his face and winced when it bothered his nose.

The response he received was more meaningless words. He couldn't even tell where its damn mouth was with all that fur! Max let the ginger creature go with a sigh, and watched as it

skittered to the far corner of the room. Right now, he needed to catch his breath and rework a few things.

“Hey.” It flinched when he looked at it. “Where’s the controls? Take me to your leader and all that crap.”

The alien drew inwards and turned out its empty palms. It spoke slowly to him, like the words would get through his skull via telepathy if it tried hard enough.

“Yeah, no,” Max sighed, hearing a foreboding noise outside, “Sounds like my time’s up anyway.”

Not that he was gearing up to fail, but on the off chance that he *did*, Max had already learned more about this ship than he’d known twenty minutes ago. First of all, it was bigger than anything he’d ever been on before. On top of that, there were no more humans on board to his knowledge (just a load of other freaks). They didn’t care about an ethnostate like the flower aliens, so at the very least, he might have an easier time picking out individual weak links.

Quick footsteps.

“Fuck.”

Growing anxious, Max circled around the desk and felt silently thankful that he could hide underneath it to be obscured from view. The woolly alien surrendered their office easily, but watched him with concern as Max assumed his position underneath the stark white furnishing. And just in case the gesture was universal, Max held up a finger to his blood streaked lips and shushed the other occupant just as he heard the door beep a cheerful admittance.

— — —

David had been given a lot of good learning moments today. Too many... is what he *would* say if he believed there were such a thing. First the blood, then Gwen snapped at him, and now the cub had escaped! Well, it had crossed his mind once or twice that a tough cookie like Max might possibly *hypothetically* make it past him one of these days, but never like this.

His voice cracked, not built for the higher notes of his raw panic, “What do you *mean* Max is gone?”

“I mean that little shit spat blood at me and then fucked off as fast as it could!” She looked livid, “And it somehow ditched me even after I tried to tail it.”

That- Okay, that sounded like Max. But for all their attempts, the cub had never actually gotten loose before. There was a difference between realistic worries and reality. Sitting with his own feelings of shortcoming was much more pungent in reality.

“At least we know they can’t leave the restricted area,” David said, reaching for the upside to ground himself. Tear blurred vision wasn’t the best for finding cubs, so he had to get himself together.

Weighted footsteps in their direction had him perking up just in case- “Davey, would you happen to know why there’s a feral human in our common room?”

Or not.

Mr Campell was never an unwelcome surprise, so David ignored the punching feeling of disappointment that must have been unrelated. It wasn’t Max. And now the cub had escaped to somewhere David couldn’t go without explicit permission and- Okay, maybe he *was* slightly disappointed, but at the scenario, not their beloved captain.

Observing Gwen’s sudden spike of angry feelings before they could make it past her mouth, David cut in a nervous laugh, “I’m so sorry you had to take care of that for us. It won’t happen again.”

Their superior looked mildly confused, “Oh no, it’s still loose in the ship somewhere,” he said, easily, “I tried to catch the little bugger, but it was more slippery than you ever were... And I’m not really into running myself, soo...”

“So you did nothing,” Gwen cut in. Her sharp glare was enough to make David wince in guilt by proxy.

Now would not be a good time to tell her that her own retrieval efforts could have room for improvement, so David kept that to himself. They could start pointing fingers later (never), because right now there was a half-sized human running around with an injured nose and a lot of anger for one tiny body.

“Okay, good talk,” he smiled, tensely, “Please excuse me while we go get him.”

For once in his life, David was moving towards the exit *before* he got his verbal affirmative. Now, that wasn’t to say he wouldn’t have stopped if their captain called out after him, but this was a really bold move in David’s world. Regardless, he put on his most gleeful expression (something that seemed to make everyone give him plenty of space) and dragged Gwen out with him to be his nose. The hellhound was more confident pursuing him with David there as insurance, and people thankfully didn’t question them as they jogged– okay, sprinted after the bleeding cub.

Technically, he wasn’t supposed to be out with the general crew unsupervised, but surely Cameron Campbell’s human could be seen chasing a cub, right? That seemed like typical human stuff.

People were in uproar, regardless. Even if Gwen weren’t there to make him confident of every sharp turn, the hallways containing the most babbling crewmen were a good pick to follow their charge... Even if a few of the prey species cried out at seeing David’s dead sprint and Gwen’s less than pleased presence beside him. The cowering got a little hurtful after the

third corridor, but once David saw less people, he saw more dark blood against the glossy floors, which was hardly a good tradeoff.

It led them to an office in the sciences section of the ship. For what must have been well thought out and logical reasons, Mr Campbell was no stranger to a secret laboratory here or there. The dedicated space was thankfully not hidden behind secret passageways like the others on account of there being ‘far bigger legal concerns’ elsewhere... Which David would not be thinking about any more than strictly necessary.

The plaque on the door declared that this office belonged to a Neil whom David had never met due to his, well, *restricted* social requirements. He was more concerned about the smear of blood beneath it, no doubt left behind when Max had forced their way in.

There was a shuffle and a hissing sound coming from inside.

“Here's to hoping Neil's out for the day,” Gwen muttered to herself, holding a paw to the scanner. Her position as the general assistant granted her access pretty much everywhere, and Neil's office was no different.

Plain walls, plain desk, and no cub. As soon as he could see the inside, David's mouth fell open to call out for him-

But he met eyes with someone else entirely.

“Please don't eat me,” the scientist croaked, shrinking under his wide-eyed look.

Unswayed, Gwen jerked her head in David's direction, “No promises. Unless you've seen this thing's cub?”

Something in him stumbled at her words. Well, David had always had his sore spots about being referred to as a ‘thing’ by anyone, but he knew his best crew buddy for life hated having to call him that, too. It was the end of the sentence that gave him true pause.

His cub.

In David's mind, Max was always *the* cub. The human. The little one he was charged with taking care of. He supposed that even inside the circumstances of obligation, which made Max a little bit *his* ... just maybe David had never had all of those thoughts in that order. In a way, he'd already been acting as Max's guardian, but surely it took more than that for Max to be designated as his child? The position did seem indefinite, at least as things were now... Was he allowed to call Max his? He wanted to. *Really* wanted to, actually, now that he had some thought behind it.

“It's under the desk,” Neil rushed, caving easily to her empty threat. “I promise I didn't steal it or anything- it just wanted in here!”

David was instantly rounding the corner, paying no mind to the scientist as he peered around the smooth white furnishing. The vision of Max he saw stuck uncomfortably close to the one he'd first met in the loading bay. Worse, even. The cub was folded to take up as little room as

possible, their bleeding nose beginning to crust as the internal wound closed. Their head rested against the back panel, and the expression they wore was unamused and deeply exhausted.

His heart ached to call out to him, to smooth everything over, but he had no idea how much of this Neil would relay to the others, and how much of *that* would get him in trouble with Mr Campbell. The words would be lost if Max couldn't understand them, anyway.

David opted to kneel, gently grasping the cub by the shoulders to pull them in. Angry-*perpetually* angry hands tried to shove him away by the face, but David simply gathered them close to the cub's chest and sandwiched them immobile with a hug. It was a little awkward to execute, but he managed to scoop them up without too much jostling so he could stand with an armful of human cub.

David couldn't bring himself to be mad.

Exasperated? Sure. But none of that carried any sort of blame towards Max. Call him idealistic, but the desire for freedom was hardly something he could argue with. If anything, he knew he was being selfish for grabbing them regardless. He could admit to that much. The smaller heartbeat against his own sent waves of comfort through David's entire being. It soothed the near meltdown levels of anxiety back into a gentle contentment. It was... security. To have the cub, *his* cub back within arms reach.

Max grumbled something, and purposefully (because this was still Max) stuck their nose into the already dark patch on his vest from earlier.

"Let's get this one back home, Gwen," he murmured, checking to confirm that they were back in a clear stretch of hall. The tuft on Max's head had grown quite soft with the regular showers, and he was inclined to pet it while the cub was still tucked out.

She looked at him incredulously, but that was okay. Gwen would get it eventually.

Chapter End Notes

I've never had a big nosebleed either. Also, Max is an unreliable narrator here. He knows Gwen likes him, he just refuses to accept a lot of stuff right now. Thank you lovelies for being so kind in the comments <3 <3

Chapter 8

“We have to check it out eventually,” Gwen’s voice rang through the holopad that David was currently trying to balance between his shoulder and ear. Since the incident, she’d gotten no closer to observing from inside the cell rather than outside of it. David still had hope.

That was a week ago now, and the nosebleed hadn’t come back, nor heralded something worse for the young human. “I know, I’d just hate to scare the poor thing.”

“Max has never once been a poor thing.”

“Agree to disagree,” he hummed, still trying to tame the unruly curls of a thrashing human, “Ow! Max, that hurts! No hitting!”

Getting Max to do anything they didn’t want to do was exceedingly difficult, as demonstrated by the herculean task of their hair maintenance. If regular prey species got squirmy around sharp things and needles, a deathworlder with that much fight in them would be no simple patient. An impatient as it were.

After a monumental amount of study, Gwen had deemed herself qualified-ish enough to use the on site infirmary to check up on their favourite little hellion. The automated machines would do the heavy-lifting, but safe operation and troubleshooting had to count for something (the tech was fairly old by health and safety standards, so it most certainly would). They actually did have a real medic, but Mr Campbell had insisted that this matter stay between them for the time being... so it seemed it was a more cost-effective effort today.

They ushered Max out from their cell just after breakfast. At first, the human didn’t appear terribly interested. They left for showers often enough, and the route was similar. He could only quietly chuckle to himself as their eyes widened- realizing the three of them had strolled right past the doors to the washing facilities. The inquisitive chatter he got in response warmed his heart, and he gently tugged at their hand to follow Gwen to the next turn.

“Oh, you might not like this,” David sighed, pausing to look down at Max once they reached the set of doors that marked the end of their restricted area.

Gwen was already at the scanner, “Just get it over with.”

The deviation from the norm made Max seem uncomfortable. Their eyes flicked to Gwen, then the door, then back to David. The stitch in their brow deepened a tick. Maybe it was only because he’d been mutated into similar features and emotional regulatory systems, but David was always astounded by just how much human expressions could tell.

“Up we go,” David hummed, and Max’s entire body went tense at the sudden hold.

There was a halfhearted kick and a scratch that caught him just under the jaw, but David would altogether say his cub settled in easily enough. Max wasn’t entirely content even after being hoisted onto his hip, but he wanted there to be zero chances of the cub running off

again. For all their anger, Max appeared to accept this, too. Curiosity must have won out against the defensiveness this time.

— — —

“Yeah, David, this is weird as shit, not gonna lie,” Max yawned, purposefully not hanging on so that the man had to strain to keep him secure.

Being bored out of his skull meant that he was regrettably not going to claw out David’s eyeballs for whatever this was. At least not until he knew where they were going. Then he could decide if it was worth being humiliatingly lugged all the way back to his cell like last time.

But this was still fucking fishy.

Max had decided that David was kind of ominous when he wasn’t speaking. For some reason, he hadn’t said more than a smattering of words the moment they entered the area with more aliens in it. His smile only grew wider, and he followed Gwen just a few steps behind, even though his legs were obviously longer. The other aliens seemed to think he was off, too, but Max couldn’t be certain because he was glaring at all of them for daring to observe him while on David’s fucking hip.

They passed by the hallway leading to that fuzzy alien’s office, so he ruled out the idea that they were going to force him to apologize. It was for the best (Max would only be inclined to do something worse).

“Are you finally throwing me out the airlock today?” he asked, knowing full well that his sarcastically hopeful tone was the only thing his captors could register.

They didn’t answer, but Max was distracted by an alien that was literally just the Kraang and laughed too hard to care.

Coming to the end of the hall yielded a set of two doors. It didn’t look very airlock-ey, so Max was forced to interpret the alien signage and completely useless drawing of... something? It could have been a really fucked up bug if he squinted right. The few seconds of failing discernment kept him occupied while Gwen used the scanner. His attention was finally drawn when the door itself opened, revealing yet another pristine white area.

But it wasn’t the same kind of office as his last outing.

Max bristled, “David, I’m going to give you five fucking seconds to turn the hell around.”

Sleek, long armed machines loomed over them like a robotic assembly line from hell. Even if he’d never darkened similar spaces on his old ships, the underlying smell of antiseptic and the fucking *grabbers* on the ends of a few of the mechanical arms told him everything he needed to know.

This was where kids like him came to get vivisected.

Responding to Max's own tension, David's hold tightened just a touch, <<Max okay.>>

Or at least, he thought that word meant okay. He was a very chatty man, so sometimes it was hard to make out one emphasized word from another. David mostly said that one when Max was about to, or had recently just attacked him. Loudly and panicked in the former, softer and more assuredly in the latter.

Max was brought further into the room of cruel and unusual suffering, but not without putting up a losing fight... Which David treated with the ease of a minorly inconvenient scuffle while cooing at him.

"Hey- You despicable piece of shit!" Max had always been the one to do immediate damage; he did *not* wiggle futilely.

The instinct to try as hard as he could and the understanding he was making a fool of himself fought harshly until he was set onto a soft white table. Predictably, he all but scrambled off of it the moment he was out of David's grasp, but gentle hands secured him back with more smooth bindings that came out of the table, strapping him down.

"I knew it! You were secretly a fucked up scientist this whole time!"

David patted his head.

"Oh, you're *so* losing that hand!"

It would be a lie to say he'd never imagined himself dying in an alien laboratory, but that didn't mean he was eager to be right. Well, okay, it was kind of cathartic to know that someone as sunny as David wasn't real, but Max was purposefully clinging to that win in the face of other, more pressing realities. Trying to put mind over matter was easier said than done once those creepy robotic instruments began to move.

The process started with light, a small laser that Max had to crane his neck to see at the far end of the table. Contrary to what this entire environment would suggest, it didn't cut him into little chunks immediately... or at all. The beam only fanned out into a curtain of green, slowly proceeding upwards until it had passed the crown of his head (hitting him in the eyes to get there). It tingled slightly, but nothing was really amiss. If he'd just been fucked over with enough radiation to kill a horse, then he'd find out sooner rather than later, right?

Regardless, he'd sputtered and cursed David and Gwen in every which way he could think of. Mostly Gwen. She was doing all of the technical stuff while David just wrung his hands and looked deeply concerned.

"Yeah! *Be guilty*, you motherfucker!"

He felt pressure, like the pad of a finger on his neck, before a sharp, bee sting pinch of a needle going through it. Max stared at the thin, offending arm in shock, but it had already

happened. There was no cold feeling of medicine, but he watched a line of red on the robotic arm start travelling out from him instead.

Usually, he'd be drugged out of his mind by now, "Shit."

To prevent from skewering himself any further on the needle, he'd remained still, but fucking David took that as an opportunity to gently approach and assure him, <<Max safe>> a few more times.

"Oh, <<safe>> my ass, you backstabbing fuck," Max snapped his jaws at the hand trying to smooth the hair out of his eyes, "Kill yourself."

The man just sighed pathetically like *he* was the one going through this shit.

Scoffing, Max waited for the flood of chemicals. The chainsaw. A rusty scalpel. Maybe two comically large electrodes to fry him between. None of that seemed to be happening, and even the needle retracted once it had its fill. The process wasn't that painful at all, especially when they went back to using those tingly lights again.

Huh. Maybe they planned to bore him to death.

— — —

David couldn't say how long he spent nervously hovering around the small human while they were being analyzed. Even after deciding to go into a tense stillness, Max's monitored heart rate was still high- well, higher than David's. Was that maybe just normal for a child? Gwen's answer was a confident, *probably* not. They knew so little and the research she was glancing at for comparison was hardly complete.

Currently, he was helping with that task. Neither of them were actual scientists, or medical professionals, for that matter. Would this be closer to veterinary?

"Scew it," Gwen sighed, "I'm like, sixty percent sure that I can drag Neil in here to help us. He won't shut up about either of you."

"Neil?" David recalled the soft looking alien whose office Max commandeered. Was David allowed to talk to him? Well, if Gwen said it was alright, "That's a wonderful idea! Every helping hand counts!"

"There's no guarantee that he'll agree," she pointed out. Sometimes Gwen liked to pretend she wasn't as assertive as she was, but he was pretty sure she could do anything with enough motivation.

"I will leave the convincing to you, my number one crew buddy," David said, feeling slightly cautious, "I don't want to leave the little one here alone after last time. I think they got scared without me."

Gwen glanced at the observation table with a slight quirk in her lips, "If I had to guess, Max smells more fear than they feel."

She wasn't... completely wrong.

Cautiously, David approached Max again and the human spoke at him in tired sounds laced with bitter undertones. All he could do was pick out his name, the fuh sound, and a lot of teeth gnashing. He was reminded with a pang that Max was better at picking up words than David was. Although, he supposed that was mostly out of necessity with no Human speakers around. For his first (and probably only) cub, David had surely done a good job of keeping in their bad graces.

"Max," David put his hand on their smaller one, "You're safe here, but you might not know that. We probably took a lot of steps back today, but I promise you that I just want to make sure you're healthy."

The cub grimaced, "*David*." But he counted it as a small win that Max seemed more exasperated than angry.

When Gwen returned, the short wooly scientist followed. For his position, he seemed a little young. The species was known for their sciences, but David just had sentimental ideas about the worth of childhood. Neil's eyes darted to each aspect of the room, however the sight of the living, breathing human in the middle of it clearly drew the most attention. Max took one look at Neil and groaned. That needed no translation.

Neil regarded David wearily, "And you're sure this one is safe to have here unrestrained?"

"My name is David," he put on his friendliest smile, "And I assure you that I am."

"I'm sorry- pleasdont'killme!" Neil flinched at the display of teeth, but Gwen's face crinkled in the way that meant she was trying not to chuckle.

"Congrats on your new clearance," she said, patting him on the back, "Now come over here and help me read this."

"You're not going to explain that?" Neil balked, "That human just spoke perfect Common, and we're not going to talk about it?"

The hellhound didn't look up from her holopad, "Nope. Welcome to the NDA. If you really wanna worry about something, check out Fenrir over there and stick your hand in their face. See what happens."

"I'll have to... decline."

Multiple degrees in different fields made Gwen the smartest person he knew, hands down. That being said, the way Neil took to the Machines with genuine interest and wonder made him quietly wish they'd brought him in sooner. Gwen was an academic being forced into the role of a jack of all trades, while Neil was a fanatic of the scientific arts.

He practically commandeered the operation from her while still pretending he was angry at the cub for their mishap, “Alright, so the human-”

“Max,” David offered, kindly.

Neil looked a little wide eyed at David, like he still couldn’t get his head around him, but conceded, “*Max’s* dental scans tell us a lot about what it eats. You say it’s been eating meat, plants, and sweet pods, but it also can do grains and more acidic options if you haven’t tried that already. Actually wait- this guy ate a *lot* of sugars and acids growing up. What kind of fruit does Terra even *have*?”

This was news to him, “I, um, I don’t really know. Max calls the planet Earth, though.”

Max looked up, “Earth?”

“No Earth,” Gwen didn’t look up from her tablet... Which David was half-sure had contained freelance romance instead of research articles for at least twenty minutes now.

The human looked put out.

Neil squinted at the readings, combing through the chemical residues until something made the young scientist’s face drop, “*Caffeine*?”

All of him didn’t like the evident horror constricting his tone, “What’s that?”

“A heavily restricted stimulant, that’s what!” Neil blinked, then checked again, “A high enough dose to show up in the teeth? That shit will give you a heart attack and a seizure at once!”

Warranted horror, then, “Language!- but, will they be okay?”

“That’s the crazy part,” Neil muttered, “Everything seems fine. I can even find *capsaicin* in here, but all of the traces are kinda old.”

He wasn’t so sure. The cold truth threw him back into the reality that the life Max lived before coming to David was more than enough to warrant his bad attitude towards people, “Who would ever do that to a cub?”

“Probably the same ones who knocked him out with lethal drugs to get him on board?” Gwen chimed in.

“Surprisingly not, actually,” Neil hummed, going quiet for a moment, “Within the context, I’d wager that was back on Earth.”

Earth. Terra. The blue circle with green blobby land masses Max had drawn. The place *humanity* came from, regularly ingested *caffeine*. At what point did these revelations start to get old? Each new fact held such potency that it started to sting. David believed with all his heart that Max could be assimilated into a loving and prosperous crew, but that job was starting to sound harder and harder.

Calm, David.

This cub lived in a reality with regular poisonings even at such a young age, had learned to only express violence day in and day out, and still somehow learned language and writing. That in and of itself was a chance of hope. If humans could draw and write and play with small paper ships underneath all of that, then Max might just settle down eventually.

Tearful breakdown *mostly* avoided, David gathered himself enough to be curious again, “How, em, how would you know that?”

“Well, the human had also been regularly ingesting fluoride since early life. Most likely through a mildly contaminated water source until...” he squinted, “Ten-ish Months ago? Maybe a year at most?”

“Oh.”

The information did not get kinder after that.

Max was officially classified as a young human male. A *very* young one. Based on his telomeres, he was only a *tenth* of the way through his probable lifespan. That was nothing! Max should still be part of a family unit. Worse still, he was malnourished, and small marks of newer scar tissue along his abdomen and arms were in the distinct star-like shape of sampling devices.

Max had been in a lab before.

“Alrighty Gwen,” his smile felt tight at the edges, “I think we’re done with the checkup for today.”

Neil’s head snapped up, “What? This is a scientific goldmine! Do you know how starved the galaxy is for information about humans?”

David felt a little faint, trying not to bristle at how similar reasons had appeared in his own childhood. The lab was never fun as a kid. Back then, David had Mr Campbell and a *mostly* complete understanding of what was going on. But this was nothing like that. Max was so adamant to not go, probably scared, and no doubt had much worse experiences and-

“We’re going back,” David said, trying not to let his words rush out too quickly as he approached Max’s table.

With a nod, Gwen took his side and snuffed out Neil’s argument by law of majority, “I wasn’t planning on being here all day, anyway.”

As soon as he undid the first restraint, Max seemed to zone back in with another tidal wave of aggression. When you think about it, it really was his own fault for releasing the hands first, but David still had a little trouble defending against teeth and nails at once.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Max asked, satisfied enough to see David rub the crescent shaped wound on his wrist every so often.

Being experimented on was never a win. Of that much he was certain, but in the tier list of Max’s lab visits, this was easily one of the better ones. It might not top the time he dodged at the last second and got Pikeman stuck with a needle of sedative, but for once, Max didn’t feel like fresh hell when he got out of the sterile environment. Tired? Yes, but not the kind of tiredness you got from some ugly motherfucker going wild on the blood taker-9000. The amount Gwen stole from him was smaller, and gave Max enough hope that he could settle the score in only a few good attacks.

It was still shitty that it happened, though.

David, like the two-faced fuck he was, gave Max an extra squeeze before *finally* dropping him back in the cell. And no, he couldn’t just leave Max to lick his wounds alone, he had to sit in there with him and look forlorn. Gwen had come and gone a few times since then, but the man was a staple.

Sometimes people just wanted to be facedown in their space cot *in peace*. “I can feel you staring at me.”

The current bane of his existence made a concerned noise somewhere to his left.

Max sat up, hesitant to admit to himself that he was bored again and this would be his only source of entertainment, “Okay, fine. What is it?”

When the other man registered Max’s attention, he scrambled to pull... something (?) out of his vest. Oh. It was more fucking sweet pellets. Max hadn’t been taken to the doctor much, but the ones on TV always sent kids away with candy afterward. Maybe that was the only reason he even *humoured* David with getting out of bed.

“David give,” he snapped his fingers. Actually... Max needed to try out some new words anyway, <<Max food eat.>>

Of course *that* was what finally made the man’s eyes spring with tears. Honestly, it was the biggest reason that Max hadn’t been able to mentally lump him in with the aliens no matter how hard he tried. David cried so much in general that he couldn’t even determine whether this was a happy or sad thing... It was just David.

“Oh, for fuck’s-” he grabbed them out of his hand, barely bothering to take a step back before he started eating the sweet food, “You confuse the shit out of me.”

<<Max safe.>> David croaked.

“Yeah yeah, <<Max safe.>>”

Being at this wits' end all the time was exhausting. Today was shit, but David was right about Max being generally unharmed, so he could’ve been worse off. Yes, he was still angry. By

now that felt more like a state of existence than something he had energy to exact revenge with. Just regular angry. And that would take a lot of effort to nurture when he was pretty sure David would give him colours again if he didn't do anything rash for the next hour or so.

This *wasn't* a compromise. He was just learning how the game was played.

Meeting Nikki

Chapter Notes

sex ≠ gender, but David's gonna use more he/him pronouns for Max now (mostly because he is projecting himself as much as possible)

“So, how’s the new cub coming along?”

Mr Campbell was asking about Max? This was like the convergence of his two favourite things!

He’d found David in the lounge trying to figure out more interesting activities for Max to do (it seemed he was getting tired of stationery again). While David still had to leave him unattended so he could sit in on meetings, they never ran particularly long, and Gwen could always stop by with food after. Leaving the cub behind somewhat regularly was another reason he needed to come up with some more entertaining fixes.

“Well, I really think the little guy is getting warmer every day!” he grinned, simultaneously telling the truth *and* setting an affirmation for a cheery future, “Max has already won over me and Gwen a long time ago, so I’m sure you’ll love to stop by and-”

“Easy there,” mirth shone in his eyes, like David was the son he never had, “Neeancy over there said that the thing isn’t carrying any unsightly diseases, so why don’t you go ahead and bring the ankle-biter to our next get together?”

David resisted the urge to squeal.

Like he’d always wanted, Mr Campbell cared! He wanted to see Max and even looked into the human’s well-being! The thought alone sent glee through his heart. More than that, Mr Campell was proud enough of their Campbell crew family to show them off to other ships! Was this David’s first Bring Your Cub to Work Day? Oh, that would definitely keep Max entertained. All they had to do was find some way around the escape attempts and-

“David? Are you listening?” Mr Campbell looked confused, cold blue eyes narrowing to focus better.

“Absolutely!” Mostly. “Oh I’m sure Max will be absolutely thrilled for the time out of his cage- er enclosure.”

The captain made a hum of... agreement? His face was hard to read as he leaned in, lowering his voice, “Good. Because I’d hate for people to say I didn’t have this whole human business under control after the two of you got out last time, don’t ya think?”

“Well, *technically* it was only Max that got out because I was just catching up to him...” David trailed off when he noticed Mr Campbell's unamused look, “Aha. I’m sorry, it won’t happen again.”

Like the sky had cleared, the captain’s face lifted. “I know it won’t. That’s because I can *always* count on you, Davey. Now go back there and- uh, do your zookeeper stuff.”

Oh, it was always inspiring to see their beloved Captain, “Yes sir!” David nodded, showing him the Campbell crew salute before confidently charging off in the direction of Max’s cell.

He found the cub lying flat on his back, staring unamusedly at the ceiling. Time had let David begin to associate that behaviour with Max being understimulated. Singing to him would lead to hostility (unless Max was on the precipice of sleep), no toys or stationery would be accepted. And generally, most other attempts to get Max to *stop* staring into space would be met with resistance.

When David entered the cell, he didn’t close the door behind him. It was the first step to getting the small human warmed up to what they were doing today.

A small chitter of acknowledgement left Max, and the human shifted to look past him out the open exit, “Water. Shower?”

“No, we just had one,” David shook his head, a negative gesture he’d picked up from Max, “But it *is* safe.”

Distrust.

Reading Max was getting easier, and the tones that left him reflected just about as much. They didn’t have a word for ‘medical centre’ which was no doubt what the cub was inferring from the use of “Safe” for an unknown location. David didn’t know how to articulate what they were doing, either. So it wasn’t like he could clear up the misconception without just showing the cub.

“Come on, buddy,” he said, putting on his sweetest voice, “We’re gonna go meet Mr Campbell.”

Sighting loudly, Max made a face that was supposed to be discouraging, but David could only find it endlessly sweet. Nothing was thrown at him when he approached and David tentatively used the scrap of permission (?) to take Max by the hand and lead him out to find the Captain.

— — —

With a hand on either of his shoulders, David gently guided him to face the person they’d been apparently looking for. The looming threat of another surprise lab experiment wasn’t lost on him, so he made extra sure to track that their route didn’t steer in that direction. For all

his terrible communication skills, David was more or less right when he said there wasn't going to be any danger, but that was only so far. For all he knew, he was getting traded off again.

"And who's this incompetent jackass?" Max asked, pointedly looking at the grey, burly alien he'd seen earlier.

As if he heard him, David crouched down and made a show of enunciating his words while pointing, <<Cuh-am-puh-bell.>>

"Nice," Max wrinkled his nose, "Why should I give a shit?"

David frowned. <<Camp-bell.>>

"Yes, Campbell. Why should I care?"

Predictably, David Grinned. Not so predictably, he was given a pat on the back hard enough to send him staggering a step or so forward. The peal of nervous laughter that came out of him after made it easier for the realization to dawn on Max. The fact that David returned to hover around him again, begging him with his eyes not to do anything rash was the final nail in the coffin.

"Holy shit, he's your *boss*?"

Ignoring the looks he got for blurting out loud words, Max's mind began to fire on all four cylinders again. There were so many ways to play this. If he fucked up in front of this guy, David might genuinely get in trouble. His spirit? Unbreakable. Body? Not easily bruised. But maybe his job security was the gap in his armour. Hell, even if he was only getting back at David for being his *active* captor, the harm coming to the other was arguably more justified. Anything he did to Papa Bear over there was fair game as war between kidnapper and kidnappee.

"I don't know who came up with this, but it was your worst fucking idea," Max informed them curtly, bearing his teeth a little in what one could mistake for a smile.

David's hand came to mess up his hair, but actually *hesitated*. Honestly, Max was beginning to get used to that one since he knew the man would comb his hair out afterwards regardless, but still! That fucking bootlicker suddenly knew his boundaries when Campbell was in the room.

What he could only assume was minutes of useless asskissing later, Max was escorted through the more populated corridors until they came to a room that he could only assume the boss man spent a lot of time in. The light fixtures were abstract, descending from the ceiling and softly pulsing a spectrum of shifting warm light. There was seating, a desk, and what looked like a holographic projection of that same bear-like alien on the wall beside it.

Good to know narcissists reigned supreme in space, too. Some things just had to be consistent.

Instead of sitting on that *clearly available* backless sofa, David led him to stand behind the desk where Campbell was sitting. Max tried to peer at some of the paperwork scattered around it, but there were sadly no pictures to be seen in the lines of blocky out-of-world text. Uninterested, Max tried to leave, but a swift tightening of the hand around his shoulder told him it was no dice.

Then the doors opened.

In walked the first person he'd seen on this ship without either a vest or a green uniform. The nymph-like alien that walked in looked unnaturally thin. Seemingly bored to death of life, their minty green head bowed like a bluebell over a holopad. Max was kind of impressed that they didn't trip and fall, considering their peach legs tapered to slim ankles and tall candy-yellow hoofs. Like a woman in platform sandals.

Her kid, on the other hand, held less composure.

As soon as it saw him, it began to speak quickly, pink eyes completely ignoring everyone else to fixate on Max and David. It looked similar to its mother in most ways, but its short green hooves seemed more adept for running...

Right at Max.

Fuck.

David reached out to stop the mint missile, only managing to slightly veer its course as it ducked under his hand to see Max. Now, he usually equated '*shorter than him*' to '*lower threat*', but that didn't apply here. Max barely had the time to take a wide stance and brace for it before he was bowled over by the hyperactive energy incarnate so hard he was wrenched free from David altogether. Knowing how to fall without smashing his head was instinct, forcing the newer alien to take the brunt of it for him, which only slowed it for a second at most as it started to grab at his hair.

He snarled, bearing his incisors at the alien in the way the flower ladies had hated, "Are you fucking suicidal?"

Instead of the common fear responses he'd seen, the half-sized nymph made a high barking noise and immediately started trying to poke his teeth. When he started to snap his jaws at them, those clover-shaped irises gave off light so complete it drowned out the pupil, and Max felt a pressure behind his eyes.

'Friendfriendfriendfriend.'

Max had never shoved someone away from him so quickly. "What the *fuck*?"

It just fucking spoke into his brain! Those weren't even- what? Since when was that a fucking thing that could happen? In his confusion, David finally had his opening to hoist Max up by the armpits and stand on the opposite side of the room. All Max could do was stare at the alien, deeply confused.

The little alien stared back with what he could now interpret as glee, and he pinched the bridge of his nose in response. “Yeah. Absolutely fuck space.”

— — —

David had seen Candy and her cub in the office with Campbell before. She was a noble on her planet if he recalled correctly, but refused to bring along any form of servantry to the office, taking only her daughter, who had proven too hyperactive to leave outside as she never listened to the help. Though her and Mr Campbell switched languages before he could understand what exactly she was always negotiating for more of.

He really thought that he and Nicolette had gotten past the running and tackling phase, but it was the first time he’d realized with a jolt that she wasn’t after him— but *Max*.

Oh *no*.

But it was too late. Max was already rolling on the ground with the girl and David didn’t have the clearance to speak to him and tell him no!

“Aww, David had a baby!” Nikki exclaimed, laughing as the cub snarled and snapped to get the young girl away. “Woah! And it has all its teeth! Mom, look! This cub has teeth and it’s gonna be as big as David one day!”

Unamused, Candy glanced at her daughter if only to make sure that she was unharmed. “Nicolette, what did I tell you about bothering critters while I’m trying to get things done?”

Would it be seen as hostile to approach? David looked human. Everything he did was considered hostile. Max clearly wasn’t losing per se, but this was not how David had originally intended to acquaint him with visiting Mr Campbell for work. How does one break up two kids without words or actions? David was a resourceful person, but this was a new challenge, even for him.

Her daughter wasn’t listening. Instead, Nikki tapped into her species’ ability to speak with ‘animals’ and there was nothing David could do but watch as Max put space between them on his own.

The pitch of the very *loud* exclamation had him moving before he could give it a second thought. Max didn’t even fight him on it. And mentally, David gave him a thousand sorrys as he carried the cub off. For all the terrifying realities they’d learned about Max’s home planet, they probably didn’t have that on Earth.

Candy turned around, expression sour, “Nicolette! What did I *just* tell you?”

“Sorry, Mom,” Nikki looked momentarily downtrodden, but afterwards her eyes landed right back on Max again.

David subtly stood in front of him.

The two parties continued conversing, but the problem was that Nikki was an antsy kid. She really did try her best to stay still and remain upright, but it didn't seem to be working well. After her third comment about the recycled air of the ship giving her a headache, her mother began to subtly ignore her, too. David could empathize, knowing that standing at these meetings was a hard task when he was a kid. Maybe that's why he let his guard down when she slowly gravitated to the other side of the room again.

"Can I please see the little guy?" she asked, quietly enough not to alert her parent.

Grumbling, Max stepped in front of David to level Nikki with a tall stare. The body language was tense, but not murderous as far as Max's bad moods went. No, the issue David encountered was the thoughtfulness behind it. Because while his cub was capable of profound cognition, Max didn't always use it for good.

"I'm gonna try and talk to you *oonnee* more time just to see if we can be partners in crime," she huffed, eyes dropping back into their glowy hue. "David likes me. It worked on him."

Amendment: While he didn't succumb to the prompts like most non-sapient critters, he could recognize she was just a kid who wanted friends. Maybe Max saw that too and was humouring her? David glanced at Candy and Mr Campbell for any kind of support. Well, mostly Candy, as it was her kid, but still.

In a fit of poor calculation on his part, he wasn't prepared when *Max* was the one who reached out to her first. Yet again, everything happened too quickly for him to notice in time, and she had already met him halfway, eyes glowing pink.

"Owwwww!" Nikki clutched at her head, staggering back from a now grinning Max. "Ow, ow, ow. You can *talk*?"

What.

— — —

"Try again, I dare you," Max coaxed, speaking in a tone he knew wouldn't give away his plan to David, "I'm ready this time."

He wasn't an animal in a petting zoo, as this unfortunate alien was about to discover. The next time her eyes got weird, and she took the bait of Max's extended hand, he was able to try out a very specific hypothesis. The backbone of it being: What if that was a two-way call?

'Frie-'

'Shut up. Can you hear me?'

Instantly, it recoiled and Max knew he'd done something right.

The alien looked to be in pain, which wasn't ideal as a communication method, but at least assured him he wouldn't be getting surprise tackled again anytime soon. Did she hear him? More still, could she understand him? David's hands found his shoulders and gave him a panicked squeeze, but Max thought he was onto something here.

The alien girl took a step forward, shaking off her residual pain like a dog and holding a hand out to him again. It contrasted the similar looking floral aliens that shied at the first bit of struggle, so he was reassured that this might still have hope. Unconvinced, David tried to haul Max back a step, but she only followed closer.

A hand brushed his, *'I am Nikki'*

"Max," he answered out loud, not wanting to waste whatever bandwidth he had on introductions. He focused on the most important things first. *'Where am I? How do I leave? Where is Earth?'*

She sprang back again, doubling over with a pinched expression. Max knew he had a blunt way of phrasing things, but never before had it garnered a reaction like this. There must've been... something wrong, whatever it was. But could she hear him?

Nikki tried to charge him again, she really did, but the speed from earlier had all but left her, and David kept the two of them separate by grabbing each and pulling them apart. Max's faded, but now acceptably washed hoodie kept him scruffed while the other was held back by the overall-esque straps on her red clothing.

The small alien had no trouble making her disappointment known, and it drew the attention of her mother and that Campbell guy.

David made an apologetic squeak, but that was all Nikki needed to ask her questions again, *'What's Earth?'*

'Big. Blue. Round. Other humans,' he answered bluntly, still not used to the uncomfortable tension behind his eyes.

This time, when Nikki withdrew, she looked deeply confused and significantly paler from exertion. Which pissed him off, considering she hadn't given him a single straight answer. Worse still, her thus far hands off mother decided that now was the time to herd her daughter away from Max and David. If he had to guess, it was because she was falling on the spectrum of visibly wilting, and not that she cared. Maybe all parents really were the same.

"Hey! You stupid hag, I didn't get an answer!" Max called, trying to wrestle out of David's grasp. "You're older right? Maybe you're not shit at this. Come over here and tell me how to leave, god dammit!"

Making his best shushing noises, his caretaker tried to placate Max and his crushing despair at *almost* getting a straight answer that he could comprehend for once, but David's soft words fell on deaf ears the same way they always did. It made him want to hit him, so he tried that.

Failed. Tried again. Whatever it was Nikki's mother wanted with David's boss didn't last longer than the next half hour or so. She kept looking at him like he was the scum of the earth, which Max found oddly nostalgic.

And then they were leaving.

The weight of that reality felt striking, quickening his heart rate when he realized he'd be stranded without any progress, "Get your asses back here and talk to me!"

More shushing noises from David fanned his anger like gentle wind on hot coals. So what if he had no idea if Nikki could do anything for him, or understand if he tried to use more complex sentence structure? It was having the *possibility* of advancement getting ripped away from him that pissed him off. The idea that he might have been able to figure it out with enough time, but ultimately didn't get to know because he had none.

"Max," David said his first actual words since the people entered. <<No.>>

<<Max no. Max no??>> he echoed, turning to face him, "Do you have any fucking clue what just happened? Or did your mother rock you too close to the wall, David?"

You know what? Fuck this. Fuck whatever Campbell and David were accomplishing. Max came in here with the objective to raise hell and that was what he was going to do.

— — —

All day.

From the moment Candy and her daughter left, through each following meeting, and until the final guest had departed, Max was a short-fused little bomb. Quiet. Scheming. Then something would set him off. Usually, David was left to watch the negotiations and try to discern what they were talking about from that, but Max's creepily intelligent gaze replaced that sport entirely.

One of Mr Campbell's associates came up to get a better look at Max, and it took all of David's energy to hold him back from biting them! And they still got a wayward nip! Oh, they looked so spooked. If it weren't for Mr Campbell's warm deflection, they might've gotten angry instead of mildly impressed. Then there was one whose body was primarily made up of organized gases, and Max spent the entire session trying to send air at them by exhaling aggressively. Then, he spat his mildly acidic saliva on the next client with delicate skin. Why did he *always* know what to go for?

By the time the doors closed once and for all, David was swimming with nerves.

"*OhmystarsMrCampbellImsorry* . It will never happen again."

"Are you kidding?" he asked, "What good's a guard if kids are allowed to clamber all over them? Humans are dangerous. Planets are round. What matters is that you got it to a state

which won't attack indiscriminately, which is a lot better than the reports we got."

"But-

"People will be talking about this for weeks! Any publicity is good publicity."

He really did try to take the praise for what it was, but the way Max was looking at their Captain didn't have David nearly as convinced. The cub could be a warm thing when he wanted to be, but today he was just a tad... prickly.

And it wasn't his fault.

Grouchy body language from the cub persisted even back in the cell. As soon as David let him go, the cub put distance between them. He could tell it wasn't just physically.

"I'm... Sorry, Max." David sighed, sitting down on the floor as the kiddo gave him a flat stare, "You probably don't know anything about what happened today, and I'd wager it wasn't very fun for you."

One eyebrow raised, the cub muttered something back. Hopefully, it was an apology accepted? Possibly?

Sitting a still developing child in front of a screen was the last thing David wanted to do. It was an easy way out of emotional regulation, and didn't truly provide the necessary skills for the child to do it alone. Even if today *had* been rough on both of them and David *really* wanted to be friends with his cub again... Which is precisely why he waited until after the evening mealtime to sit down in the cell and watch by himself. It just happened to be a child appropriate show that taught colours and numbers at an intriguing volume

And slowly, increment by increment, Max made his way to look at it over his shoulder. David didn't dare move or acknowledge him past tilting the holopad slightly to make it easier for the cub to see, but internally he just wanted to give the little one a big old hug. It took about ten minutes or so before his eyes gravitated to Max- if only to gauge his expression, but the cub was already looking at him.

"...Hi." he blinked.

"Hi." Max echoed, attention drifting back to the screen.

It didn't sound like a sorry, but it didn't hold anger, either.

Enter Daniel

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

While Max was behaving better in the cell with him, he was still, er, *expressive* in the coming weeks that David brought him along to the meetings. It was unreasonable to assume he could stop the cub before *every* reactive bite when people came so close, or at least that's what David was telling himself on the days it happened twice or more. He had never particularly enjoyed being taunted or prodded at, either, so in a strange way, having Max nearby made it easier (even if he was causing problems).

Also, it was much less boring. Maybe having a cub just made the job better all around. With that knowledge, David might've excelled further in a position that let him work with and teach kids, but that was neither here nor there.

"David!" Nikki whispered, conspiratorially, "Max says that you have candy. Can I have some?"

For a child, she was on the more accepting spectrum for their predicament... though in her mind, all creatures could communicate to some degree. Nikki was just a little unused to them talking back. Even if it meant giving herself headaches, she was always chattering to Max about something or other these days. It was pretty cute to see.

His eyes flicked to either kid, then the loud conversation happening at the desk, "Did he know?" David kept his voice down, a smile playing at his lips as he fished into his pocket, "Okay, sure. But pace yourself, okay?"

"Kay."

As Nikki dug in, he noticed how Max seemed deeper in thought than usual. Nikki didn't seem to have a lot of the answers he wanted- nor was she particularly good at relaying David's hushed questions, but at least he was with another cub his age. David gave him a small nudge to snap him out of it, and offered him one... And it was accepted. Small victories.

Did he mention Max was learning new words?

"David Max outside soon," he remarked, just after lunch, once all the meetings were over.

"Yes!" he nodded, expressing positivity to every small victory so Max would keep going.

"Mr Campbell says we're meeting someone today."

Max squinted, cogs turning.

"New friend." he simplified.

The cub scoffed, “New stranger animal.”

Despite himself, he couldn't stop the grin that sprouted from Max's creative use of the limited vocabulary he had. In all honesty, David was actually a little anxious about being introduced to someone else, even if Mr Campbell gave his endorsement. But this wasn't about him. It was about Max and his development. So what if they were getting a little temporary help? That didn't mean David wasn't doing his job as Max's primary caretaker and guardian, right?

“No, Max,” he chuckled, reassuring himself, “New friend.”

Smiling at the suspicious look he was thrown, he led the two of them into a smaller, more quaint office inside the restricted area of the ship. It wasn't nearly as updated as Mr Campbell's, but David found that being able to walk there unescorted made it somewhat his own, and that was nice... not that he'd ever hosted a *meeting* meeting. It was usually just him and Gwen watching Rob Moss. All the more reason to be excited that Mr Campbell was doing this!

Perpetually distrustful, Max hesitantly took a seat when David let go of his hand. It was coincidentally the one closest to the door, but at least he wasn't underneath the table. Small wins, David.

Some minutes later, Mr Campbell poked his head in, “Right on time Davey, I'm glad you could join us.”

“But, we were already-” David's words fell away at the sight of the stranger.

The *human* stranger.

Oh stars!

It was like looking in the mirror: Same tall, bipedal form. Their shoulders sat the same width apart and led to the same flat hands with opposable thumbs near the wrists. The same rectangular face, upturned nose, pale scleras and black pupils stared back. After going so long without seeing another adult human, the resemblance felt funny... in a good way, of course. The fact that even their hair was cut to mirroring styles even though it would grow long without maintenance obviously didn't scare him at all. Just look at the sheer difference in colour!

They were two ships hot off the factory, given different paint jobs. If Max had seemed strikingly darker than him, then this man had somehow obtained less pigment than even David. He had blonde- nearly colourless hair, blue eyes, and pale skin that was completely washed out by the cold lighting. Neat!

“David, Daniel. Daniel, David,” Mr Campbell introduced, gesturing to either of them.

The man, Daniel, smiled at him, “Pleasure to meet you, David!”

A friend. A friend that could talk. That realization cut through every other thought in David's mind. How could it not? He spent several moments frozen in shock, only to break through the ice with a dawning, huge smile. David had a really real new human friend he could talk to! This was wonderful!

He practically sputtered over his own words in an effort to get them all out at once, "Howdy! The pleasure's mine!"

The captain, ever a thoughtful and hard-working man, lingered back over by the doorway with a grimace of joy, "Well, now that you're properly acquainted, I can get back to my incredibly important duties. I'll send Glinda by later if you need anything."

So what if this meeting was a surprise? How could David ever not love surprises when things like this happened? David glanced over at the suddenly Campbell-less doorway to ask what the special occasion was (or correct Gwen's name), but that didn't matter when he could just talk to Daniel himself!

The thought alone sent him beaming again, "So, what brings you to our humble place in the stars?"

"Well sadly," Daniel looked downcast, "My last human-friendly ship got shut down, and since then, I've been searching far and wide for more of my own kind."

That sounded so sad! His heart ached for the man. David couldn't imagine what would happen to him if he were kicked out of the Campbell Crew! That was all he'd ever known! If this new friend found himself adrift, then this welcoming ship could surely make it better.

David patted him on the back, just like Mr Campbell did whenever he needed reassurance, "Well, I think you'll fit in just fine here, Daniel."

Daniel's gaze shifted to Max, who had been quietly inching out of his seat towards the door Mr. Campbell had left ajar. Firmly, his hand found the cub's shoulder, "I think so too, David."

He could only chuckle when he saw that Max's eyebrows were drawn so far together that the wrinkle went halfway up his forehead, "Don't be like that, Max! We just hit the jackpot!"

Not five minutes into their introduction and Daniel already reminded him of himself. Although, he supposed that's just how being the same relative age and really relative species worked. This just meant that Max had two (one point five?) human role models! He couldn't imagine anything better. Especially since Daniel was such an apt communicator. Did that mean one day Max could speak fluent Common and learn good manners? Maybe Daniel could teach it to him if he knew any Human! Oh, David should really focus on not crying.

— — —

Oh God. There was another one.

“You have *got* to be shitting me.”

Daniel’s gaze turned on him. Wide. Hawklike. Predatory. A distorted funhouse mirror of all things David, “Woah there, kiddo. Watch the language.”

Max could tell you exactly when his brain violently blue screened. Probably the second it registered and actually *understood* the sounds being thrown at him. Not through scraping together words that he’d picked up from conversation. Not David’s occasional butchery of a word or two. Both of those things required effort. Strain. Short of having Nikki shove blunt gists of things into his head, all communication on this ship, no matter how small, involved struggling to extract meaning or concepts from the unfamiliar sounds and never really knowing if you understood it right. That was just how it worked.

But the English was logged, processed, and shipped straight to his brain in real time, no effort needed. The pathways built on years of fluency and pattern recognition didn’t miss a word. It had been so long since someone had actually spoken to him in a way he didn’t have to fight to understand.

“You-” he felt a little short of breath. “You speak *English*?”

Hope of that had departed from him the moment Daniel spoke Alien at David. The disappointment was short lived in the face of caution because that dude seemed so fucking weird. Max counted himself lucky that he could even parse the man’s name from Campbell’s blunt gestures.

“Of course I do,” Daniel smiled at him, all canines and brilliant white teeth. “What kind of guardian would I be if I couldn’t?”

Beside them, David made a strangled noise. He looked some mixture of utterly delighted and shaken to his very core. Huh. That was new.

Daniel laughed, placing his free hand on Max’s head as he responded to the rapid canter of David’s disbelief with more Alien. That was all it took for Max to sharply remember this guy’s weirdness and duck away from Daniel entirely. The one that looked just like David, but felt *colder*. Like, seriously, what the fuck was up with that?

Oh for fuck’s sake- Max had more pressing things to ask about.

“Hey! I have a shit ton of questions for you!” Max snapped, pointing an accusatory finger at Daniel, “Where am I, why am I here, and when the *hell* am I going back to Earth?”

Finally, the volume caught his attention, “Easy there, fella. You’re on Cameron Campbell’s ship. I can ask David about the rest, alright? Just be patient.”

“Patient? I’ve been stuck in outer space for god knows how long-” He cut himself off with a groan, already being ignored by the foreign chatter above him. Only one more human in the mix and it felt like he was back on earth already. What would it take for someone to just fucking listen to him?

After taking an unbearable amount of time to power trip and prove that Max couldn't force Daniel to talk to him, the man turned around to make eye contact again, "David says this is your new home now, isn't that nice? You've been adopted."

Adoption? Last time he checked, that didn't involve being kept like a prisoner and paraded around to esteemed guests. Then again, that seemed like just the thing David would tell himself to feel better. Nikki kept referring to him as David's kid, too. How deep did this go? Max had wondered about how young David was when he got sent there, but now this basically confirmed it. This entire thing was a shit show!

Max grit his teeth, only more so when he saw the small glint in Daniel's eye. He didn't give a single damn at all, did he? "Okay, asshole, why are you here then? Why do you look so much like David?"

And yeah, the similarity really was fucking uncanny. They were just the same dude, but re-textured. He was pretty sure twins could do that... right? But Max knew that wasn't fucking true because they just got introduced in front of him! What the hell was going on?

Considering it, Daniel made a thoughtful hum, "David and I are like... brothers of sorts. It's not something you should think too hard on. I'm here now, aren't I?"

Purposely. Fucking. Vague. Oh, Max wanted to bash his own head against the table so he didn't have to put up with it. Ugh, David would be sad. Fine. Max wanted to bash Daniel's head against the table. There wasn't even any way he could verify if anything that shifty motherfucker said was true because there was no one around to contest it!

<<David!>> Max said, grabbing his hand and squeezing it to steal his attention. <<Daniel. Stranger. Unsafe.>>

He had been *trying* to communicate the fact that he'd totally fucking called it earlier, but it was useless. Instead of clocking Daniel like he should have, David just let out a warm peal of laughter before shaking his head and gently chiding him.

— — —

"Ah, I'm sorry, Daniel," David chuckled, wiping a stray tear of friendship from his eye, "Max is just a handful. I'm sure he'll figure out you're not a threat eventually."

Currently, the cub had gotten up and sat himself in the farthest chair from Daniel. That fixed glare wasn't going anywhere, but at least the position kept him away from the exit.

"Ah, I get it," Daniel lifted both hands, showing complacency to the smaller human before chuckling, "He's just raggin' on the new guy, am I right?"

Finding out that Daniel was bilingual on top of all his other qualifications really took the cake. Ignoring the part of himself that he would label as jealousy (but there's no way he

would be jealous of Daniel when he was such a nice guy), David had watched star-struck as the two spoke to each other. He'd asked every three seconds or so what they were talking about, and it paid off to learn that Max was still, well, Max.

Apparently, even to another real, bona fide human.

"What does that finger mean? He does it a lot," David hummed, watching Max make a gesture at Daniel.

The man smiled, the corners of his eyes tightening, "Peace among worlds."

Huh... not something he'd expect out of Max, but Daniel didn't seem like the type to lie so that was... good? Good. David internally smoothed down a faint edge of disbelief.

"Well, I think it's time for his lunch about now anyway," he smiled, "Max, *we* are going to *leave now*."

At this, Daniel said something to the cub in Human. David really couldn't understand it, but the tones he used were friendly, and seemingly undeserving of the abyssal death glare Max sent back. The cub still responded to him, though Max's sounds remained questioning and accusatory. Curiosity and a large fear of missing out made David wish he could just understand just a little bit more, but Max stood abruptly and planted himself right next to David to signal the end of the conversation.

"...And this is Max's cozy little space we have for him," he said, turning the observation window clear for viewing.

Scattered drawings were adhered to the walls, with some only being chicken scratch human lettering above specific things. The one marked <<B-E-D>> above Max's pile of blankets and cot had been among the first Human words the cub taught him. Embarrassingly, David caught sight of some of his own books that he had left behind there on account of how often he lingered in the room with Max. Little by little, it was becoming more personalized with every passing day.

Max stood like a sentry in the entrance, "No Daniel." The rest was in Human to address the man properly.

"Don't be like that, Max," David sighed, all too familiar with Max's grief in the early stages of knowing each other, "Daniel friend."

The cub, ignoring both Daniel and David, made a peace among worlds gesture with either hand and went deeper into the cell now that David let go of him. So that was... a yes? Peace could also be a form of goodbye. David was only more confused than before he learned what that finger meant. He followed Daniel into the cell anyway.

A few minutes later, Gwen came by with Max's food, "Hey Fenrir, your lunch is ser-" Her voice fell silent over the communicator when she took in the room's occupants.

“Oh! Gwen!” David bounded up to unlock the door for her, eager to have Daniel meet his best Campbell crew buddy for life, “Have you met Daniel already? He speaks Human and once he’s settled, I think we shoul-”

“You know, I think now is the perfect time for me to take a break from this project,” Gwen breathed, moving a step further back at the first chance.

“Aw, Gwen. Are you sure?” David asked, and funnily enough, Daniel must have been thinking the same thing because they jinxed each other. It just proved how similar their minds were!

Looking uncomfortable for some reason, Gwen’s mouth fell open to respond, but...

“Gwen!” Max called, his heavily accented words holding... almost urgency behind them, “Not friend.”

She winced, but clearly intended to clean her hands of the situation. David had known her long enough to see when she needed to take her breaks, and mentally, it was clear she was as good as gone when Gwen turned around and left with little more than a clipped “Good luck” to Max.

A twinge of guilt struck David when he saw Daniel’s kicked expression, no doubt re-living the isolation of his past. “I can promise you it’s just nerves,” he sighed, sitting down, “Both Max and Gwen need time to warm up to people. This little one’s tried to maul me more times than I can count.”

“That’s good to know,” Daniel nodded, looking over Max’s food. “Any tips for getting into his good books?”

David thought about it... The question was one he asked himself often, “Well, the little fella likes his personal space. Sweets and educational shows are also a hit... And every once in a while, bring him something he hasn’t seen before.”

— — —

“I don’t know why you think I’m such a bad guy, Max,” Daniel hummed, passing him a water pouch.

Max looked at him, stuffing another leaf into his mouth for the sole purpose of grossing Daniel out while he talked, “For one, you’re not answering any of my fucking questions.”

His head tilted, concern washing over his features (all Max’s mind could chant was fake, fake, *fake*). “Aw, well there’s only so much I know. I just got here.”

“Then ask David.”

David perked up at hearing his name, making a short, unintelligible exchange with Daniel before being clearly placated with another one of his deceiving smiles.

“You’ve been adopted. They want you here. David’s trying his best to connect with you, and you *still* keep rebelling against him.” his words were spoken lightly, but cutting.

Bristling at the blatant guilt trip, Max narrowed his eyes at the newcomer, “So you’ve said. But here’s the thing, I’m not going to accept that I’m just screwed over and left in space to die.”

Almost imperceptibly, something in Daniel’s expression changed. “You’re right, Max. You should’ve never left Earth. It’s only natural that you’re down in the dumps. After all, it’s common knowledge that all negative emotions come from space.”

“*What?*”

“Dark toxins leftover from the big bang are everywhere. You don’t even have an atmosphere to do its insufficient job of protecting you,” Daniel tutted, looking at him like it truly was a shame, “That’s the only reason you’re like this.”

Taking a long, solid moment to look at Daniel like he was an idiot, Max tried to work through the information here at his own pace. For one, Daniel was fucking crazy. Despite having spent his entire abduction discovering things that shouldn’t exist, it was for his own good that he drew the line at evil space toxins being responsible for his completely reasonable and sane emotional response to being robbed of his autonomy.

“Look, man,” Max rubbed his temples, “I’ve seen talking flowers, werewolves, telepaths, and now an identical copy of David, but come on. I’ve heard better lies.”

“Just think of it, Max,” Daniel sighed, forlornly, “From the moment you’ve gotten out here, doesn’t everything just feel so much worse?”

Yeah. It did. Because he was lost. in. fucking. space.

Calmly, Max wandered back over to his cot. If there were a strike system, he figured that Daniel would be fresh out of them by now. He didn’t *want* to be friends with that creep. He didn’t want to be told more bullshit about space, and he most certainly didn’t want Daniel knowing where he slept during the night cycle. Max curled on his side, pretending to nap as his hands snaked under his pillow.

The resin shards Max had been keeping were right where he left them. They came into his hands easily while David was too distracted talking to his new best friend to notice. Did he necessarily want to stab Daniel? Okay, well- the answer to that was yes. Max wanted to stab a lot of people. But were the consequences worth actually committing? Pondering this, he tucked a skinnier shard into the sleeve of his dominant hand.

“Hey Daniel,” he called, interrupting their conversation, “I realized I never asked where you’re from.”

Expression creasing at the disrespect, Daniel barely sent him a glance, “Earth, silly.”

“What country, dumbass?”

“It was a while ago,” he said, passively, “I don’t remember which one.”

There was no way to poke holes in a story that Daniel wouldn’t give him, Max realized. Was he really supposed to expect that he’d actually forgotten? Well, it wasn’t impossible, but if he had been taken when he was old enough to know it was called Earth instead of Terra, surely he’d been forced to do the pledge of allegiance enough times? Daniel *sounded* American, but that was hardly an indicator.

“Alright, did you have a family? A dog at home?”

Daniel’s grin didn’t falter. “I have many brothers and sisters.”

“How many?”

“Oh, too many to count by now.”

That... That was ominous as fuck.

“So you were like... born in a cult or something?”

“I don’t remember,” Daniel dismissed him, turning back to his conversation with David.

Hold on, was this guy born at all? Max’s mind flashed with a series of images. Torso takers, alien experiments, wide scale cloning. Especially with all that shit he was spouting about the inherent maliciousness of space. It had to be something weird. How do you not remember if you were born into a cult or not? That seemed like a yes or no question! And even if he was, like, a hardcore Mormon or something, he’d be offended enough to deny it!

“You... you know what a cult is, right?”

Daniel glanced at him, then back at David. He let Max’s question hang in the air unanswered in exchange for whatever the other man seemed to be enthusiastically gushing about. Knowing David, it was probably him.

It got old quick. “Who the fuck are you really?”

“Watch your language.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

His final question was all but redundant, as Max was already swinging at his leg. Daniel was wearing spotless white pants, and it would have been a real shame if someone poked a hole in them-

<<Max no!>> David grabbed his hand, faster than even Daniel could react. With his other one, he gently wrenched the impromptu blade from Max’s hand. <<Daniel is *safe*.>>

— — —

“Daniel, I am so, so, sorry,” David panicked, holding the resin tray shard high above Max’s head as the cub continued to yell at him for taking it (how did he keep getting more of those when David wasn’t looking?).

His attention seemed split, half between David and whatever the cub was going on about. David had assumed that speaking human would have made Daniel an easy fit for friendship. When he first met Max, he would’ve given anything to communicate properly. Daniel could, it just... didn’t seem to be working. He was really hoping they could at least skip the unprompted violence part of their budding friendship.

“It’s fine,” Daniel responded to one of Max’s obvious jibes before turning back to him, “They weren’t kidding when they said he was a live one.”

David blinked. “That’s not... how all humans from the wild are?”

“Oh, I assure you we aren’t,” Daniel looked sympathetic to the cub, “All of this certainly isn’t helping him.”

Something in his words made David feel small, no matter how gently Daniel tried to break the news to him.

“What do you mean?” he tried not to sound as desperate for answers as he felt. “How did you become so... you know, civil? Is there something I can do?”

Laughing, Daniel’s eyes scanned Max’s cell with a critical gaze, “What? Did you expect me to be some troglodyte just because I’m from Earth? No wonder he’s still acting out.”

Something cold ran down David’s spine. It wasn’t like he expected to be perfect at raising a wild species he knew nothing about, but, well, he was ashamed to be caught believing stereotypes and being a bad guardian. David wasn’t a bad person! He just didn’t know! Oh stars, this was really bad news. Was Max’s attitude really his fault?

“No! Of course not!” David squeaked, feeling his face lighten several shades, “I always knew Max was clever, I just- ahem-”

“Just thought his nature had nothing to do with you?” Daniel asked, “Oh, David. Max is a growing cub. If he were in the right environment, I’m sure your attitude would’ve rubbed off on him by now, don’t you think?”

Despite himself, a spark of advocacy flared in his chest, if not for himself, then for Max, “It might be a slow pace, but it *is* happening,” he said, “Max is making so much progress here. We’re both learning.”

“I don’t intend to remain on a ship like this,” Daniel said, the admission sounding like a weight coming off his chest, “In one week, I’m going back to Earth. And by the looks of things, Max here should come with me.”

What?

David felt like he’d just been struck with a shuttle.

“Daniel! You can’t quit the Campbell Crew on day one! There are so many fun things to do! You haven’t even gotten to know everyone!” The words seemed to just gush out of him, quickened by the terror of the concept of his new friend leaving- and even asking to take his cub with him!

Shrugging, Daniel’s cold blue eyes met his squarely before melting with reluctance, “Just think about it, David. I know it’s a lot to ask of you, but Campbell already filled me in. Don’t you think Max should be with *his own*?”

Oh.

Oh no.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry fellas I forgot to post yesterday. School do be like that. Also yeah, David's dumb as rocks, but I tried to work around what he does in canon

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Daniel knew he wasn't *actually* human.

There was no helping the way his eyes flicked to Max. How his heart sunk into his chest. What would he do if he knew that David wasn't really one of them? Everything about Max was hard to predict at the best of times, but there was a reasonable chance that if reacting negatively were on the table... the cub would take that route. David had planned on breaking the news later on. Preferably when the timing was right and they had the language skills to discuss it in length.

"You... you haven't told him, right?" David asked quietly. "I'm happy you know. The best friendships are built on honesty, but Max is..." reactive, skittish, vulnerable, "Different."

And David cared *deeply* that he felt safe with him. Especially now. Needed it, even.

Considering him, Daniel showed his palms, "No, I haven't. Although, Max seems like a smart one. I wouldn't be surprised if he's figured it out on some level. He doesn't seem to trust anyone here."

Everything in David's world operated through a matter of interpretation. Most things really weren't that bad because there was always, *always* another angle. It was only a matter of finding it. This was just a little tougher to turn right side up. That's all.

His chuckle sounded a little strained, even to him. "Daniel, you seem like a mighty fine crewmate, but I think you should spend a *little* more time getting to know Max before we start making any *big* assumptions like that."

"Maybe," Daniel hummed, noncommittal. His easy smile came back, and with it, a note of sarcasm that David was going to pretend he didn't hear. "What would I know?"

Okay. So maybe he would know a lot, but David could bank on the fact *he* knew more about Max, specifically. Wait- since when did this become a *competition*? Oh goodness, David. That's not right. This should be a collaborative effort between two mutually interested parties, with the end goal being a thriving and well adjusted cub. That meant friendship, teamwork, and biased as he may be, it meant Max would definitely stay on the Campbell Crew with David.

Right?

Rattled but not discouraged, David approached the cub to ruffle his hair, "David, Daniel, and Max to Campbell soon."

Finished eating, Max only swatted at him lightly, "With Daniel?"

“Let me explain,” Daniel chuckled, dropping into more human tones as he addressed Max. The cub huffed a few more questions at him, but got up regardless as Daniel grinned, “He says he’s ready.”

He felt his own smile tense, “That’s great.”

Not to think that he was unsure of himself, and certainly not unsure of Mr Campbell and his wonderful ship, but David... David found himself a little more lost in thought than usual as their group walked to the head office. He saw Daniel’s eyes linger. On the hand that had to keep Max following them and not escaping. On the scanners on every door. And, most pointedly, on Mr Campbell.

“Wowza, nice place,” Daniel whistled, sharp eyes looking at everything.

“Thank you,” the captain nodded, preening slightly, “But please, try to refrain from making comments while we have guests. We wouldn’t want to be distracted.”

Daniel glanced at him. “Alrighty.”

Did it really sound that bad when you said it out loud? David tried not to think about it too much.

The first few days of bringing Max along to the meetings had been... tough, for obvious reasons. If it was any reprieve, the schedule had gone back to shorter visits from fewer people now that the frenzy around a new cub had died down. Nikki would have probably exploded at the sight of Daniel, so it was a rare stroke of luck that she'd already been by that morning. Their captain had many jobs to do, and meeting clients was only a small part of running a ship. He also enjoyed his leisure time. Lots and lots of it. They only had to sit through one in the afternoon.

“That was... strange,” Daniel decided as they made it back to the restricted part of the ship. “So you just stand there and look... menacing?”

His tone came out a little incredulous, and David partially understood. Menacing had never really been in his wheelhouse and anyone who’d ever genuinely gotten to know him would tell you the same. The moment he opened his mouth, David was kind. And that was nothing to be embarrassed about.

“Mhm, but I use the time to think, you know?” he hummed, looking on the bright side, “There’s always new songs to make up.”

Turning to the cub, Daniel went back and forth with him for a few moments, “Max was under the impression that we were decorations, and I suppose that’s not too far off.”

David ruffled Max’s curls to ease some of the stress, “Well, I’m sure it feels like that sometimes. Anything else?”

It took a few moments, but Daniel’s confused expression smoothed out. “He wants to know when he’ll see Nikki or the scientist again.” his expression turned thoughtful. “He must be

lonely.”

Ouch.

There were many things David knew he could provide, but other youngsters closer to Max’s age were not one of them. He tried to play with the cub every day, but Max’s interest was fleeting and more often than not David felt um... strongly discouraged by his reactions. Could the cub really have been missing people all this time? Max was anti-social on the outside, but obviously Daniel must have found something different since he was *actually* able to ask about it.

“...I had no idea.”

— — —

“Okay, there’s this girl named Nikki and she tries to scramble my brains whenever she shows up, then a scientist guy who they brought in to do... something. I’m still unsure about that one,” Max ranted, baffled at the shit he was talking about now that there was someone to hear him, “How often will I like, run into them? Because I’d like a fucking heads up once in a while.”

When Daniel translated his question over to the other man, Max found himself mildly off put to see David’s smile drop. It didn’t seem like an unreasonable demand. Just what was that guy saying?

“David says he’ll work on it.”

“Cool. Whatever,” Max rolled his eyes, “Where are we going *now*?”

When Daniel spoke, he used a chipper disposition that was *clearly* just so that David thought they were getting along better. “Back to your cell. Now’s a good time to help your learning along.”

“I think I preferred space Miss Rachel,” Max muttered, remembering the baby shows that David always *happened* to be watching nowadays.

For all of his shadiness, Daniel was unfortunately necessary at the moment. The baby shows would only tell him so much and they fed it to him in little chunks like he was utterly braindead. Daniel, on the other hand, gave him just enough time to get a marker and paper before bombarding him with the basics. Max was a little pissed that they weren’t just teaching David English, but he shelved the idea so he could insult every alien he came across in a way that they’d actually understand.

“For the last time, how do I swear?”

“Sorry little guy, I can’t teach you that,” Daniel hummed.

Max squeezed the Marker in his hand, “Then at least teach David what fuck means!”

“Language. And no.”

If he thought learning anything from David was patronizing, then Daniel was worse. As much as he was trying to teach, he was trying to show off the fact that he was teaching. Similarly to his other stand in language teacher, the praise for every fucking thing was excessive and exclusively delivered in a tone that grated on his ears. The key difference being that Daniel kept looking at *David* instead of Max. His obvious need to one up him stank up the room like cheap cologne.

Between his poorly spelled phonetics (because he was not being taught to *write* in Alien), Max scrawled together a pigpen cypher just to insult Daniel in the margins. The only thing worse than being stuck in fucking space with shady faces like these was being stuck in space with shady faces *and* forced back into school! Honestly the cypher was more than to keep himself entertained than to keep it hidden from Daniel. That fuck wasn’t looking at his notes at all.

<<Max is all “fucking” done now,>> he announced once it became clear that his brain would break if he tried to absorb any new information. Now seemed like a good time to try out his ‘key phrases.’

“Language,” Daniel was beginning to sound like a broken record.

<<I’m hungry,>> he snipped, ignoring Daniel in favour of looking at their weakest link.
<<David *when is* food?>>

Caving easily, he gave Max’s hand a squeeze with a delighted sound. <<Good job, Max. I ___ Get food. Understand?>>

<<Yes. Understand.>> he nodded, “More or less anyway.”

David got up off the floor, bringing with him his holopad that was absolutely chock-full of videos from Max learning to talk. Max... well, obviously he thought it was embarrassing to know he was being recorded, but having real evidence that Max could actually talk to people was important. That, and, well... David’s praise felt more genuine than a certain *somebody’s*.

Who was still in the cell for some reason. “Well?” Max said, expectantly, “Why don’t you go with him?”

It’s not that he didn’t trust Daniel- Yeah no he didn’t fucking trust Daniel. At all, actually.

“Someone has to look out for you,” he said, glancing at the door. “Now that incompetent fool is gone, I have a proposal.”

Raising an eyebrow, Max didn’t grace him with a response as he looked at Daniel expectantly. He was creepy and he knew it, no matter how good of a front he put up for David. The effort to get Max to buy into his crap had been half-hearted at best, meaning

either Daniel was stupid, or he had enough power that he didn't feel particularly inclined to shill anything. The second was more foreboding, but he refused to be intimidated by some space scientologist.

"Alright, hard sell," Daniel's eyes narrowed, "You need me, Max. Whether you'd like to admit it or not."

"Don't say it like that," Max fought the urge to just brawl already, "You're really not helping yourself. I don't fucking need you, freak show."

"That hurts my feelings. And here I thought someone in your position would be open to a negotiation," he sighed.

"You are a white van in human form."

Confusion flickered across Daniel's face, gone as soon as it came as it was chased away by his frustration, "And *you* are getting on my last nerve! Can't you see I'm trying to spare you from your miserable fate?"

"Okay asshole, how in your fucked up little religious fantasy are you doing that?" he snarled back.

Full offence flowed through the cracks in Daniel's mask and Max would be lying if he said he didn't want to start a fight. Being registered as an opponent to argue against, instead of a child acting out, felt cathartic in ways he didn't know he needed. Finally, he'd been presented with someone he was allowed to mess with, and sure, was it a shitty idea? Probably, but cheap thrills were cheap for a reason. He could use the headrush.

The man took a step towards him, "*Purification.*"

Max didn't fucking like the sound of that, but he really couldn't help himself, "And I'm supposed to take that from a loonie bin like you? I don't know if you've checked yourself lately *Daniel*, but you seem to be pretty fucking negative right now."

"Maybe I wouldn't be if you stopped making things so *difficult*," Daniel's head dropped to the side, neck cracking while his eyebrow twitched, "As a loyal follower of Xemuug, I can be cleansed as many times as it takes so long as there's less of you raving *heretics*."

There was real danger here. Past the hot anger in his veins and venom on his tongue, Max knew that he was still locked in a room with a crazy man. The physical advantage he was used to holding over all the other less violent aliens really didn't apply anymore. Daniel could fuck up his day if he wanted to, and the look in his eyes said he just might. One hair's breadth away from psycho killer and Max was only just now contemplating if he should regret his words. The rest of him wanted to see just how far he could push it.

Closed or not, he was already positioning himself closer to the cell's exit, "If that's how you convince people to be saved, I'd rather just be told to burn in christian hell," he snipped, "Saves us both the fucking effort."

“It’s not going to be that easy, you little-” Immediately, Daniel’s words cut off and the anger vanished from his face, his stance, everything.

Max had half the mind to be confused until the door behind him opened and David’s cheery presence stepped through with a few trays. <<I’m back ____ the food!>>

Checkmate.

“Oh you have biblical fucking timing,” he sighed, leaning against David’s leg, <<*Daniel. Is. Not. Safe.*>>

— — —

“Oh, he’s just worked up because I thought I could recap some vocabulary before it was time to eat,” Daniel smiled, chuckling easily at Max’s indignation.

Usually, it was Gwen’s job as general assistant to bring stuff around Max’s scheduled mealtimes, but today David got to try out the task. For some reason, she took one look at the new face on board and didn’t want anything to do with this half of the ship! That Gwen was such a prankster. David was only *mildly* crushed and would be sure to make her change her tune at the end of shift with some persuasive reasoning (begging her to be nice to Daniel so he didn’t leave).

At least he could expect it from Max. Being cautious was the cub’s base instinct, which made the process of convincing a little slower. Max kept tugging on his pant leg to defame Daniel in his small repertoire of words.

“Awww!” he melted, gently detaching the child’s hand from the fabric, “Were you scared without me? Daniel’s not bad, Max. No one’s out to get you, little guy.”

Not in an intimidating use of the phrase at least. Sure, Daniel had his own opinions on raising cubs and how to run a ship, but David was sure he’d settle down once he was less intimidated too. If he learned anything from Max, it was that most mean things he did weren’t from a place of real hatred. So even if he talked nonsense about sending Max back to Earth? Daniel was probably just growing fond of the small human, and that was nothing to blame him for.

The cub made a livid sound, pointing at Daniel, “Stranger!”

Oh, he was going to laugh out a lung, “Max, that’s not nice, silly.”

In response, Max hollered something in Human. It probably wasn’t kind.

“Easy there, pal,” Daniel smiled, taking one of the trays from David’s hand, “Someone’s got a bad case of hangry.”

David couldn't tell exactly how much he was able to parse, but Max gave them such a mean glare for it. In fact, the remainder of the evening was decidedly spent on his bad side. With an extra person there, the cub's anger felt more manageable. It was a lot cuter when most of those grumpy eyebrows were now being sent Daniel's way.

"Alright, it's been a long day for him," David sighed, looking down at the amount of red ink on Max's latest masterpiece, "We should let him unwind. It's close enough to lights out."

"I was wondering when we'd be getting shut eye," Daniel agreed warmly as he surveyed the room, "He doesn't get scared here alone?"

"I wouldn't know," he sighed, "Max won't sleep if I'm in here. I'd check on him, but for obvious reasons we have the same circadian allowance," that sounded like a downer of a sentence, so David rushed to amend it with a reassuring smile, "But I'm sure we'll have some great sleepovers in the future! Everything will work out."

Yeah. That was something he wouldn't mind waiting for.

With one final smile sent Max's way, David and Daniel bid their goodnights and parted for the evening. As he got further from other people, it got a little harder to hold his outlook in place. Over the course of just one day, Daniel had given him... a lot to think about. Some good and some less so.

Even after every change they made, was the environment that much of a detriment to Max's health? He was aware that the Campbell Crew did a lot of things... differently, but that was always just a matter of different opinions between Mr Campbell and the galactic regulatory council. So what if they didn't get along? That wasn't inherently a sign that their ship was doing anything *wrong*, per se. It just meant they had different goals, and if anything, the council was in the wrong for always heckling Mr Campbell about silly things like customs declarations and trading permits. So much of it was really just a matter of perspective...

David sighed, taking in the homey clutter of his sleeping quarters as he lay on his side. His eyes caught on a small paper ship, proudly sitting on his shelf.

This was his cub.

It mattered.

The resulting internal debate knocked a few, only *minorly* important hours of sleep off his night. Not enough to make him too slow to catch Max when he tried to shove him and run for the exit in the morning, so that was something. At least the little fella wasn't short of conviction!

"Good morning to you too, camper!" David chuckled, "Are you ready for a new and exciting day?"

Max's eyes looked over David's shoulder, "... No Daniel?"

“Daniel here soon,” he hummed, pleased to be able to communicate with Max to some extent now.

The cub made a show of looking disappointed.

The other man arrived shortly after breakfast. Just in time to go back to Neil’s lab to fill in anything they might’ve missed the first time while they keyed Daniel into the ship’s door mechanics. Since then, Neil was actually the one keeping track of Max’s diet and filling out the requests for new supplies in accordance with projected caloric and nutrient requirements... Max had a lot to make up for. Even now.

— — —

“David, I think I picked up the words, <<excite>> and <<new day>> earlier,” Max already recognized this fucking route, “I hope you know that you are the actual worst for this.”

They were going to the fucking lab again.

“Aw,” Daniel cooed for show, “I can tell him you’re nervous if you want.”

<<How do you say,>> Max huffed, “Die in a fire?”

Max knew he was only wasting his breath. Two failed escape attempts later, he found himself staring down the scientist again. For now he wasn’t on the table, but he had no doubt that he would be if he tried to jump that sucker. Daniel explained little to nothing like the useless fuck he was, and that was fine. Max was already used to his shit, anyway. The second Max tried talking to David instead, Daniel would begin *‘translating’* in a concerned tone. Yeah, Max wanted a second opinion.

<<Neil,>> David gestured to the scientist, then back to him, <<Max.>>

Goodie.

Neil waved a dexterous hand and Max raised an eyebrow at the human gesture, <<Hi.>>

<<Hi,>> he echoed.

Neil turned to Daniel, gesturing to the exam table, and Max was more or less able to understand when he said, <<Please sit ____.>>

“Oh, now it’s your fuckin’ turn,” he chuckled, “I hope he probes you.”

Daniel sent him a chiding look, but much to Max’s delight, actually complied with Neil’s instructions. Neil was nowhere near his height, so the table had to be lowered down to accommodate the scientist. The two spoke politely. Max understood a handful of <<yes>>

and <<no>> answers, although he couldn't understand what Neil was asking. It *seemed* normal, until one of those blood drawing needles moved in towards Daniel.

Soundly, he snatched it before it could break skin. He didn't flinch. Didn't yell out. Daniel's smile just grew sharp again, light words carrying an edge that only David couldn't hear. The perks of being unrestrained.

Neil looked confused, writing something down in the terminal before apparently moving on.

"You're scared of *needles*?" Max asked, incredulously.

This time, Daniel had been goaded enough to respond, "I'm not afraid, Max. Not everyone claws at the walls like a rodent when things don't go their way. I'm just exercising my right to privacy."

"Dude, do you have like, an STD or something?" Max asked, grinning at his misfortune, "I hear that quartersister has been on the rise lately."

"I do not have-" his eyes narrowed, "-whatever *that* is."

"Ohhh, right. Purity culture in cults is pretty aggressive, huh?"

For just a moment, Daniel sent him a look that could curdle milk. Every now and then he would crack like that, but Max had more or less accepted the fact that David would never notice because he was dumb as rocks. While that was true, Neil on the other hand seemed to have caught the exchange and seemed... put off. He stopped waving his little techno-wand thingy over Daniel's wrist, then flinched when those cold eyes landed on him again.

"That dude totally thinks you're a torso taker," Max snipped, "Which honestly? You might as well be." Daniel didn't outwardly react, but he knew he was listening even as the man nodded along to whatever the others were saying. "A Nordic blonde, who's also a doppelganger, who's into cult shit? I mean, it's perfect. Do you hate garlic, too?"

"*Unbelievable*," Finally done with his wrist, Daniel turned to him. "I have been nothing but good to Max. I teach you the language, I understand yours, and what? You insult me endlessly. Truly, endlessly."

Max pinched the bridge of his nose, "Yeah, I'm an asshole. I get it," Grating on everyone was really his specialty, wasn't it? "But even what you just said makes it sound like you don't really *spea*-"

"Enough," Daniel interrupted him with a completely even smile, "David does what, exactly? Stand by and look gullible? Is that why you seem to inherently trust him more than me?"

Uh, what?

After *all that*? His *finest* psychological warfare. The sharp goading that Max used to make anyone crack- and Mr. Clean's hairier cousin still directs all that anger at... David? That's who he's getting a superiority complex for? Are you fucking kidding me? Time and time again in this damn place, Max felt like he never got the recognition he deserved.

“I’ve gotta hand it to you, Daniel,” he said, deadpan tone carrying a flat note of surprise, “You might’ve just actually offended me.”

Daniel’s eye twitched. “You’re insufferable.”

And you just said waaaaay too much about something you’re insecure about.

“I’m pretty insufferable to David, too,” Max nodded, a small evil smile creeping into his expression, “But you know, he has boundless patience for that sort of stuff. Really makes me feel seen, you know? Not everyone’s cut out for the childcare biz.”

Daniel gripped the exam table’s ledge so hard that pale skin showcased the even whiter bones of his knuckles. He said nothing.

Okay, Max. Gameplan. There were a lot of pieces on the chessboard, but most immediately, he was working with a man who was a chronic optimist and a volatile cultist who might just hate David more than he wanted to cleanse Max of his sins.

He could work with that.

Never before did Max expect such a clear opportunity to arise that could chain react to rock two entirely different boats at once. Just by warming up to David more, he could invoke Daniel’s wrath- and it wouldn’t even land on him! It’s not like he *wanted* to lean closer to David and immediately get a comforting hand on his head- Max wasn’t an imbecile. He just knew it would mess with tall, bleached and creepy and David was predictably affectionate. Nothing more and nothing less.

Chapter End Notes

Neil does not get paid enough for this

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Okay, so maybe his plan wasn't working the way he wanted it to... And maybe it was? It was kinda hard to tell. They *were* fighting. Competing? Whatever the fuck seemed to unfold over the next two days felt hostile, for definite.

Even back when Max couldn't understand a lick of what he said, David had always been a talkative person. Now multiply that by two, and give each of them a tight smile and something to prove. Whatever David was doing, Daniel was stepping in to '*help*' (which roughly translated to try and do it better). That was a clearly desperate fucking move, and instead of ignoring him or throwing him overboard or something— David competed right back! And Max was stuck in the middle! He wanted them against each other, but never in his life did he think it would be this fucking maddening.

David had been humming. Humming! Like he always did because it was *David*— and clearly that was an invitation for Daniel to join in but louder and-

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” If there was anything good to come of it, Daniel had been putting extra effort into teaching Max their keyboard smash of a language, <<Stop making noise!>>

<<Okay, Max!>> David's chipper attitude remained completely intact, <<What do you need?>>

At this point? A fucking break, <<Only Gwen. No David no Daniel.>>

Ever since *he* came around, she'd made herself scarce. Which, fair. So would Max if he were able to, but it was still shitty. Even if she was genuinely busy, Max wouldn't mind just... coming too. Like a trip to the grocery store but with more possibility of escaping and getting to wreak havoc across the ship.

Yeah, the look that crossed David's face said he had a similar train of thought.

<<Sorry. Gwen is staying outside.>> he grasped for words that Max would know, <<Remember before... Max hurt?>>

“Yes, the nosebleed,” he rolled his eyes, “It was a great play and you're all fucking sore about it.”

This, apparently, was the wrong thing to say in front of Daniel. Max could've sworn he saw his eyes spark with interest the moment blood was mentioned. He cracked his neck audibly, ready to beat the dead horse and jump back into his argument with David. Max was more tired of it than angry by now. There was nothing better to do but strain his ears and listen to what they were saying. Everything felt too quick, and their weird syncopation made it even

harder to pick out words he understood. The only way to get better was to immerse himself in the language, right? Especially when his name came up so many times.

<<_____ staying here.>> David looked taken aback, words coming out thankfully slower as he tried to punctuate himself, <<Max _____ not going __ Earth.>>

He better not have heard that correctly.

“*What?*” he reeled, <<Max Earth?>>

The raw note of disbelief in his voice finally snapped them out of it. While historically Daniel had been the one to interrupt, this time it was David who quickly spoke a series of edged words to Daniel just as he opened his mouth. Just like that, the argument seemed to have sparked again, but then...

<<Okay,>> David sighed, visibly steeling himself against something as the other man turned to him.

“Alright, Max. I have an offer for you.” Daniel began cautiously, “I was hoping to do this after David’s surrender, but some people just can’t be convinced.”

Max raised a questioning eyebrow at their theatrics, “Spit it out, Daniel. You’ve been convincing him of what, exactly?”

All too happy to oblige, he crouched down to Max’s level. “I want to take you off this ship and go back to Earth.”

He’d heard correctly.

That revelation was nearly enough to knock the wind from his chest. There was no more speculating about what they were arguing about anymore. *Earth*. Daniel was asking to take him back to Earth and David wasn’t having it— *David* of all fucking people! Max didn’t even know where to begin to process that, especially since this was Daniel they were talking about. Max wouldn’t trust him with a plastic knife at the food court!

Was this always what he wanted? Was that the reason someone as insufferable as Daniel was even on this ship? “That feels like something you should’ve led with!” Max snapped, “And how do I know you’re telling the truth? You seemed pretty hung up on that purification bullshit earlier.”

Self-satisfaction seeped around the edges of his smile, “I assure you that David has known about my intentions since day one. As your guardian, I thought it was more fitting to take it up with him instead.”

Max turned to him, slowly. <<Daniel takes Max to Earth again?>>

Guilt. *Fuck*.

David was talking, strained with the discomfort of confrontation, but Max couldn’t hear a damn word he said through the blood rushing in his ears.

Everything about this was shitty. Max couldn't count the times he wished he could just go back to earth and experience a *normal* amount of terrible, but was he actually desperate enough to trust *Daniel*? Come the fuck on. Max wasn't sure he'd make it off the ship alive with him there, much less however many light-years it took to get back to Earth. That would be the first Darwin award given off-planet. But David still tried to take that choice away. David still pulled a fuck-you level power play to not even talk about that shit.

<<Outside,>> Max made a sharp gesture to the door, then pointed at each of them, <<All done.>> “Fuck off.”

Flashing with disbelief, Daniel's eye twitched- “Language- you can't just reject an offer like that- You want to go home, don't you?”

“I want to shank your kidneys, Daniel. I don't owe you an explanation, but I think you can figure it out,” he snapped back, bristling.

<<Max->> David's voice was still high, and Daniel's smug attitude was dissolving.

<<David.>>

They stared at each other.

Then, finally, he saw it get through David's skull, <<...Okay.>>

Watching them leave only came with the hollowest sense of victory. After all this time, he could finally force them out, but only because David was fucking exposed, and Daniel still thought he was peddling something. Surprise surprise, they didn't bother taking the bomb they dropped with them. Quiet didn't solve the anger, but it helped with the overwhelmed feeling that was buzzing through his head. Now he could just seethe in peace and not have to worry about being patronized or fucking leveraged for some reason or another— Since when had *that* become a novelty?

It took *hours* to cool. And only then into something he could sleep through. Too bad he wasn't out for long. Not even enough to have an upsetting dream that smelled like his parents' house... which was pretty fucking short by his standards.

“Max,” Came a singsong voice, too easily distinguished as reality for the instant emotional ping it sent.

“Jesus fucking-” Oh. It was just Daniel. Max blinked a few times, adjusting to the influx of brightness that poured into the room once Daniel turned on the lights... But the hall outside was still in its dimmer night cycle.

Wait a minute. There was nothing *'just'* about Daniel.

Context blew back in like a shitstorm from hell when the door closed behind him. Maybe it was the lack of immediate monologuing that made him realize that this was the final countdown. No one on earth- or in space for that matter, should ever have to wake up in the

middle of their sleep to see a Daniel where there was not previously a Daniel. And without David, at that.

“Fuck,” Max bit out, rushing to reach under his pillow for his defences and stand properly.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

“Language,” Daniel’s voice was light. Not quite fond.

Max took one step to the side, and Daniel took one step to match him. There was tension in his bent knees. Waiting to spring forward- *at Max*, he knew. Fuck. No one could hear him scream in a cell like this, but well, they wouldn’t be able to hear Daniel, either. It had been a while since Max had genuinely tried to kill someone, especially someone stronger than him. Would he even be able to make a difference, or was it worth surrendering with blind apathy? Give him a ‘*Well, enjoy wearing my skin*’ and call it a night?

That would have been a solid maybe if it weren’t for the fact that he fucking *hated* Daniel.

Since his big one got taken away *last time* he tried to stab him, Max was left to hold a comparably less functional scrap of resin mealtray, “Good to know even you can run out of sparkles. Don’t be sorry, nobody in this fucking place can match David’s commitment.”

Cold anger flashed back at him through blue eyes, but he made no move to deny it, which was almost worse. “A creature like you doesn’t belong here, Max.”

“Yeah, well, we’re the same damn creature, aren’t we?” he asked, stooping low to pick up a water pouch. In a better life, maybe that question would’ve been rhetorical. “I said no, asshole. At the very least, you should’ve seemed less invested.”

“Aren’t we, indeed.” Cracking his neck with a loud pop, Daniel’s face darkened, “I tried to reason with you Max, but now you’ve left me no choice but to grab you like some commoner!”

Daniel made a swipe for him, and Max barely flung himself out of the way as his grip tightened on the water pouch. The decision to roll it was a split second one, really. Daniel’s angry, confident stride forward only meant there was no stopping it when his foot landed squarely on the cylindrical pouch. His right leg came out from underneath him so fast that Max had already heard the sound of Daniel dropping bodily to the floor by the time he realized it worked.

“Oh, *shit*, ” the adrenaline half-smile that brought Max was nearly worth the homicidal expression looking up at him.

It was significantly less funny when Daniel’s hand shot out to grab him around the ankle and *yanked*, manually dragging Max down to his level in less than a second, “Little wretch!”

Fear tended to paralyze those with a little less experience in fighting tooth and nail for their life, but when Max landed on his ass, he didn’t waste the opportunity to kick at Daniel’s face using his non-restricted leg. This felt worse than most of those other times, if only because he

had the fading hope that David, or Gwen, or hell, Campbell could stroll by and realize something was going down. Max thought he was over wishing someone would come and save him.

“Get- Your hands- Off me!” His heel met Daniel’s nose with a telling crunch, finally making that cold, pasty hand relinquish its hold.

Scooting back to shakily rise to his feet, Max scanned the area again while his opponent did the same. The door was still closed. He still only had one shank to his name, and Daniel was- Daniel was bleeding purple out of his nose.

Oh. Fuck. *Fuck*. Okay.

No trick of the light could disguise the colour— Like Kool-Aid. Like poison. *Not human*.

“I fucking called it!” *God*, that felt good, “You are a torso taking alien!”

When he wiped it, all he accomplished was dragging a grape coloured smear across his face, “Well, looks like I can’t get anything past you, Max.”

The dry finality in his tone snuffed out the feeling of victory. Like this changed nothing. Because it didn’t. Fuck.

“Aren’t you gonna scamper off on all fours to clean yourself up?” He hissed, the hairs on the back of his neck raising when Daniel remained eerily still while Max pressed his back against the unyielding door. “What if someone sees you?”

Instead of following *or* answering him, Daniel fished a blood-smeared hand into the pocket of his pristine white slacks and pulled out a vial of clear liquid. “You know, I really should’ve listened when the Wood Scouts told me this was the only thing that could keep you down.” Daniel mused, but the accompanying chuckle was devoid of all humour, “It’s hard to smuggle gases, so you’ll have to forgive me for working with what I have.”

“What an underdog,” Max rolled his eyes, readying his small, scrappy knife.

The door was closed, but if he could somehow get Daniel to open it, then he’d at least have somewhere to run. Slim chances were good chances when that vial was the alternative. Now... he just needed to figure it out.

“Are you seriously going to make me come over here?” Daniel sighed, looking at him with the barest bones of what could be considered morbid amusement. “Xemuug help me not to wring your neck before we even get off this ship.”

This was so fucking stupid. He was going to die.

“Fucking try it then,” Max snapped, “Unless you plan on boring me to death?”

Daniel *pounced*. It was so fucking immediate that Max nearly couldn’t fight the overwhelming instinct to duck and cover. It took everything he had to intercept the hand

reaching for him and move it just a little to the left, where the scanner was. The one good fucking thing about it was that the force of that suddenly uncapped violence made Daniel's hand hit the scanner fast enough to make him wince from the sheer volume of impact.

Unfortunately, he didn't account for the other one.

In that same moment, Max was slammed into the door so hard that he saw stars. Then it was gone, and they were both tumbling out into the dim hallway.

At the very least, he'd been expecting it. That was the only edge he had on Daniel to shake off the shock and bolt as soon as he could scramble to his feet. Each footstep rang out like gunshots, and for once he was grateful for it. Max wasn't trying to stealthily escape this time. He was *loudly* escaping. And that required cussing out his pursuer on every exhale. Seconds felt like hours, but it wasn't over for him yet.

"Max?" A head poked out from one of the doorways, spilling out with golden light. David's hair had an even worse cowlick than usual. It would have been funny if he weren't running for his life. Once he spotted the source of the noise, his tired and confused gaze lifted slightly, moving past him to Daniel.

Max didn't bother slowing down, barreling into David and gripping the sleeves of his stupid fucking pyjamas for dear life, <<Daniel is bad!>> Fuck, his mind was blanking on all the words, <<Stranger animal. Stranger "*fucking*" animal!>>

Something in his stance shifted, eyes more wakeful as he stepped to stand in front of Max. <<Daniel! What's going on? _____ doing ____ hurt? What is ____?>>

He was clearly questioning everything. The late hour. The fact Max was out. The fucking *purple blood*.

Was it stupid that he was putting his faith in David? Of course. But did he feel marginally better to not be alone? Yeah. More than that, even. But if he brought up the fact that Max was still hanging on to his shirt— The back of it now- then he would crash this whole ship into the nearest asteroid.

<<Give me Max. He _____ and escaped.>> was the clearest thing he could make out in Daniel's response. The look on his face was only a shambled imitation of the lies he usually put on display. There was hatred. Burning, seething hatred. Once again, just by existing, David had thrown off whatever demented plan he was trying to execute.

<<No.>> David seemed to actually notice it for once in his goddamn life, <<No, Daniel. Why would you _____?" Disappointment and something more bitter.

Turning back to him, David crouched down low. His eyes scanned Max for any sign of injury. One hand found his shoulder while the other cupped his face and tried to pull him closer into the light from the doorway for proper inspection. Seeing that worry on his face nearly distracted him from Daniel's silent approach.

"Shit- David!"

One hand clamped soundly over David's mouth from behind, while the other uncorked the vial and held it firmly under his nose while he struggled. The moment it was unsealed, even Max could smell the wave of chemicals that filled the hall. Potent. Wrong. Max lunged.

“You crazy motherfucker!” he dug the scrap of resin hard into Daniel’s arm, using every trick in his arsenal to make it *hurt*, “You fucking lost! Just stop!”

He hissed, grip on David tightening with the pain until Max found a new spot a little higher, “Silence crea- shit!”

The grip loosened, and David’s head immediately launched back to hit Daniel in his already busted nose, <<Max, escape! Go!>> His green eyes were wide and frantic, but hazy if you knew where to look.

It was fucking tempting. For sure it was. When they were so identical like that, he could tell himself that David had a fighting chance. Or that he was a fucking traitor and it wasn’t Max’s problem. Just pretend that running off to go hide in some other locked corridor was a better option, even though he knew full well how fast those drugs were working.

“Like hell I will!”

But Max was an idiot. A sentimental fucking idiot.

While the two were struggling, he noticed that Daniel still had the vial of anesthetic in his free hand, and Max made a grab for it in a bid to shift the scale. His fingers reached for the vial and- Daniel noticed at the last second and recoiled, shoving Max over without a second thought- But David saw. David *dove* to catch him- He shouldn't have. It was an easy opening. He knew it even as gentle arms kept him from the worst of the fall. Daniel's shadow was already there by the time they could get to their feet and David had to shove the other man away by the fucking face right as Daniel tried to hold the vial under his nose again.

So it spilled on David instead.

The way the fragrant toxins dripped off his face shouldn’t have made him still his breath the way it did. It was just on the skin, right? But each moment happened in near slow motion.

<<Oh... ____,>> one hand came up to wipe at it as he staggered back, unstable. <<Max, please go.>>

“Shit!”

He hit the ground like a sack of bricks a few seconds later. It took all of Max's strength to stop his head from hitting the ground, but David couldn't keep himself upright after that either- He was out, *out*. Just like that. Even Daniel stilled his murderous crusade to watch on with abject rage bubbling in his eyes.

“Fuck, fuck fuck. Are you alright? Shit- I’m sorry,” Max hunched over him, shaking David by the shoulders, growing more concerned, “What the fuck did you fill that with?!”

“Nothing anyone normal can handle,” he murmured, still staring at David. Then, his eyes snapped to Max and the man visibly geared back up to homicide again, “I swear to Xemuug if you ruined this for me-”

This time, it was Max who lunged first, “Just shut up!”

For his transgressions, Daniel got a shank to the thigh. And the arm. And well, Max was mostly seeing red at that point, so it was anywhere he could reach while Daniel was kicking and shoving for distance. He got quite a few good hits in the ankles. Daniel got a few good hits on him too. Max didn't care- he could hardly feel it. For all he knew, David was fucking overdosing back there and it was his fucking fault!

Grappling for control, Daniel caught hold of his wrist and pulled Max in. His hand tightened, painfully so until his last weapon was wrenched from him. That purple blood kept on seeping through his white clothes and Daniel seemed far too eager to return the favour.

“Now I could just make you drink this, but that wouldn't hurt enough, now would it?” Holding open Max's hand, one elbow hooked under his neck, Daneil dug the scrap straight into the centre of his palm.

“Fuck!”

Daniel didn't stab him, no, he wanted to *carve*. The shard wasn't as effective at slicing as it was shanking, so the processes took force. Dedication. Scraping as much as it cut. When he was ready, Daniel pressed the vial into Max's bloody palm and doused the wound with anything that hadn't already spilled. The liquid met skin with the faintest fizz and as strong sting that had Max hissing as he writhed to pull away his hand.

It was in past the fucking skin! Max felt the heaviness spread up his arm, gathering spots in his vision. Slurred curses fell out of his heavy tongue, and Max glared at the empty vial that had fucked up his night of sleep. His false sense of security. Everything. Everything was fucked.

Only when Daniel let go of him did Max realize that he hadn't been supporting his own weight for the last few moments. Without it? Max just folded. All he could do was narrowly avoid chipping a tooth on the floor by getting his arms underneath him at the last moment.

You know, Max was never. *Never* going to do recreational drugs if he survived this. He'd had enough.

“You better not die from that,” Daniel hissed darkly, hauling David back into his room so he wouldn't be found.

Looking at his unconscious caretaker, Max couldn't help but second the thought as his world became cloudy and dark.

Chapter End Notes

His ass is not taking Max back to Earth

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

David woke up on the floor.

It pressed pain into his cheekbone, shoulder, and hip, only to compound with the nauseating migraine clustered on both sides of his head. The latter was certainly leftover from whatever was in that liquid that was *still* making his thoughts seem to swim slightly.

And someone was shaking him. That wasn't helping.

“-avid!” A voice above him called, the brownish blob in his vision blocked out the cheerful sun lamps of his quarters, allowing it to slowly form into an image of Gwen, “Shit, I thought you were fucking dead!”

“Gwen?” his head was pounding.

“Yeah,” She nodded, hauling him upright to lean against the wall, “You look terrible. Neil’s on his way.”

He *felt* terrible.

“Wha-” He knew what happened. Oh god.

Pain in the body, he could deal with after enough tears. He knew it well. What actually made him scramble to grab and subsequently vomit into the trash can was fear. Somehow, the feeling sought his delirious mind hard enough to cut through the drugs. The pain. All of it. The force devastated him completely. It tightened in his throat. Stabbed through his chest. Quickened his lungs. Enough so to get up onto his feet again because he just *had* to do something about it.

“Woah, woah, woah,” Gwen was immediately there to stabilize him, unshakable, “Sit your ass back down. You need to talk to me, okay?”

“Where is Max?” he croaked, wiping his mouth.

He had to find Max.

“Daniel and Max are gone. He left on his cruiser two hours ago after bribing one of the bay workers.” Gwen’s voice was heavy with the weight of guilt, and it wasn’t just about being the one to break the news, “So sit.”

Not necessarily complying on purpose, David’s legs gave out right then and there.

“Gone.”

Max was gone. Away. Just like that.

His world grew blurry again and it wasn't the drugs. Water gathered in his vision, finally cresting over his cheeks when the sea of emotions had nowhere left to go. Daniel wasn't who he said he was- and David had trusted him! With everything! That alone could pull the rug out from underneath him. And now his cub was completely off the ship because he failed him and-

The feeling was unspeakable.

"Fuck."

Tentatively, Gwen changed her supportive hold into a hug. "I'm sorry I wasn't there. We'll find him. I'm-"

"It's not your fault," David hiccupped. If nothing else, he was sure of it.

Gwen didn't trust Daniel. She made it abundantly clear. It was only him who kept pushing for her to come around. *Max* didn't trust Daniel and tried multiple times to express it and David just- He was so hung up on the idea of him that he couldn't see the truth.

Hearing all the commotion in the hallway, David was convinced it was just Max escaping again. But it was late. And with that colour coming from his nose, he realized Daniel wasn't as human as he said he was, so he'd probably been telling other tall tales, and-

And none of it mattered anyway because he still couldn't fight him off.

"Do we have any good news?" he asked. Optimism had always been a security blanket for him, and right now he needed something to hold onto.

Gwen's face softened, and she leaned back to pat him on the shoulder, "Ah, Kind of."

That good news turned out to be Neil. He arrived minutes later, out of breath and lugging a case that had to be at least half his size beside him. David wasn't able to pay his best attention at the moment, but after drawing his blood, Neil mixed a lot of... something together. It tasted burnt, but David would never tell him that (or maybe charcoal was important?). That couldn't have been all that was in it. Whatever Neil gave him worked well enough to bring David to himself after a dozen or so blended minutes of needle pricks and funny drinks.

"And *this* is why you give more funding to the fucking sciences," Neil complained, crouching in the hallway outside with a camera and a few swabs to run forensics on later. It was his own way of showing he was worried, but David really wished he hadn't seen the evidence again.

When the door originally opened with a pneumatic hiss, he felt cold dread wash down his back. Speckled drops of well-dried blood marked the floor. It was smeared in some places from being stepped in and, most pressingly, it was both purple *and* red. The fight had left David bruised, yes, but not bloody, so it wasn't his.

Max.

Max had bled there.

David glanced away, his face still blotchy as he felt a little less tethered to the room, “Has... Mr Campbell heard?”

“Yeah,” she nodded softly, “And even if it’s for none of the right reasons, he’s really mad. So things are going to be alright.”

No doubt some of it would land on him. David knew he deserved it, he just... Having Mr Campbell disappointed in him felt like another impossible loss for today.

And he certainly didn’t expect to confront that so soon... But Gwen’s comm began sounding. David could tell it was him, even from the tinny, barely audible noise she held close to her ear.

“Yeah, we found David. He’s alive.”

After a few moments of listening with a hard expression, her ears dropped... “He says there’s a call specifically for you waiting in the communications bay,” clearly hesitating on the second part, she added: “Daniel won’t talk with anyone else.”

— — —

Max’s first few moments of consciousness were hazy and disjointed.

How nostalgic.

It was the kind of awareness that came even before his eyes were open. The mind outpaced the body, and he did his best not to react outwardly as details of what was happening and how he got there trickled into his psyche like cold water. If he was going to be murdered in his sleep, he got the sense it would’ve happened already. Any time he could spend pretending to be out was time he could use to gather information.

For one, the sound of muffled engines told him he was somewhere new. It made it hard to tell if someone else was in the room with him or not. Max was upright, and bound to a chair (?) or something? He wouldn’t know what it was without opening his eyes, but one of those ropes was digging into his injured hand. From what he could feel, the wound was still somewhat sticky... so either it got reopened or he hadn’t been out for ages.

And he was totally experiencing olfactory hallucinations, but coffee wasn’t a bad smell to wake up to.

“Oh, look who’s up and at ‘em,” A voice. Daniel’s voice. Fuck.

Now he was allowed to groan, “Unfortunately,” Max cracked his eyes open, and whatever odds he thought he had were thrown out all too quickly.

The new ship they were on was actually something he could recognize as one. While he’d never seen the helm of Campbell’s ship, in front of him there was a windshield and a cockpit not nearly large enough to belong to the same vessel. His seat wasn’t either of the first two in front, but instead he’d been placed onto an uncomfortable passenger’s chair and far out of reach from the buttons. In terms of quality, it was... well, if Daniel didn’t kill him, then there was a lovely OceanGate level of dramatic ending with his name on it. For fuck’s sake, one of the overhead lights was already blinking. That was the kind of charm he was looking at here.

“I’m not going to say it went off without a hitch,” Daniel admitted, a bandage over the bridge of his nose, “But the point is that we’re here now.”

Scowling, Max internally wondered if all that fighting for his survival was even worth his time, “Whatever. Sue me for not making it easy for you.”

With a dark chuckle, Daniel moved deeper into the ship behind him, “Sure, underestimating how much they cared about you made my job so harder, but you know what? Now it’s going to make it that much more *fun*.”

Restrained as he was, Max couldn’t see what Daniel was doing back there. It made him uneasy, if not annoyed, “We don’t have the same idea of fun,” he inhaled to sigh, but stopped himself, “And what the hell on this junk rocket smells so much like coffee?”

Daniel stepped back into his line of sight, this time, with pristine white safety gloves on and a dark, steaming pitcher in his hand, “Coffee? I don’t have to pretend to know what that is anymore,” he hummed, like the thought just occurred to him, “It would be this, though. The sweet smell of ascension.”

Max stared at it, willing the neurons in his brain to compute, “That’s coffee.”

“You’re drinking it,” Daniel countered, “You’ve clearly built up tolerance to depressants, so you’re getting a stimulant for once.”

A few more lost brain cells, “Yeah. Coffee *is* a stimulant. That’s kind of how it works,” Was it wrong that he actually wanted to? At the very least, Max could go out on his own terms.

Confusion washed across his features, but he blinked it off, pouring it into a long-spouted bottle, “If nostalgia is what cleanses you off of this ship, then be my guest.”

Okay. Being poisoned to death was generally not one of the best ways to go. The fact that whatever mystery concoction happened to smell like something he drank on the daily back home had to be some kind of space coincidence. There were only so many smells his nose could detect- like how Gwen looked like a furry when she clearly was born on a planet with no concept of it or relation to Earth. It was just really hard to be terrified of an inevitable end when, well, someone had just made him a cup of joe.

“Fine,” he practically spat the word.

Daniel's eye twitched, but he tilted the bottle anyway, "You're brave. It's a shame you're so insufferable."

He was right.

Bitter, shitty coffee greeted him. It was like the instant stuff and grass clippings mixed together into some abomination of kale and gritty powder. All of that being said? Max didn't care. Even if it was thick and acidic, nothing in his mind could convince him that this wasn't coffee. Whenever the internal bleeding started, he might change his mind, but for now? For now he couldn't be stopped.

"You'll be dead within the half hour," he informed, drawing back with a sharp smile, "Please notice how your pulse will start getting faster. Nausea, difficulty concentrating... And then either your heart will give out, or the seizures will do it."

Smacking his lips, Max's face was still creased a bit from the taste, "Shut up, Daniel. You sound like a Monster commercial."

He set the bottle away, and Max heard the sound of him peeling off the gloves, "I'll be calling Campbell's ship once your symptoms set in." The smugness in his voice made Max wish he'd spit some of it at him, "I can't wait to see the look on his face."

That, was something he could work with. It was in his best interests to start displaying symptoms as much as possible, preferably before they actually started, so Max might have time to be located, or hell, keep Daniel distracted with gloating until he could figure out a plan on his own.

"If I start vomiting blood, you *will* be in the splash zone."

— — —

The communications bay was uncharacteristically empty. The few staff members monitoring radar and surrounding transmissions had been abruptly dismissed in the face of what clearly was not allowed to be let out of this room. He'd rarely been given the chance to go in, and never once had any of the less intuitive instruments been explained to him. Mr Campbell stood like a pillar near the dash, backlit by blinking screens and pulsing lights. Unhappy, clearly. But for once, that wasn't his greatest concern.

David just wanted Max.

"Good to see you're still with us, Davey," he gave him a firm nod, "I never could have anticipated that Xemuug would send a spy. I expected there to be some camaraderie between you two since you're both, you know..." he made an encompassing gesture to David.

What- “You knew he wasn’t human?” David sputtered, and he caught himself looking at Gwen, but she seemed just as surprised.

“I thought it was obvious with all the talking,” Campbell’s eyes squinted, and he made a dismissive noise before turning back to the main screen, “You’re not the brightest bulb, but you need to do what you do best and get that critter back for us.”

Confirming that they were the same- And Campbell had known all along and just expected them to understand was- well, it shook him when David thought he was already undone. He told himself that it was Daniel’s job to announce himself, and it wasn’t Mr Campbell’s fault that David was so easy to deceive... but it left more than enough ugly loose ends in his mind. Beyond that, it felt like he’d gained and lost someone who should have been a good friend in one single breath.

Because Daniel had revealed himself to be nothing like David at all.

“Is he on the other end?” David asked instead. All of it was terrible- but it could be put aside for the time being.

“The scoundrel called us about when you woke up and has been the most unreasonable business partner I’ve ever come across.” He seemed more irked at the reminder, “Refusing to speak to the captain is not a good start, but I know you can straighten him out and work out some kind of compensation for lost capital-”

Max wasn’t just *capital*. Something in the word had his hand curling into a fist- But Gwen’s sharp eyes caught it just in time to interrupt Mr Campbell before he could speak any more.

“Alright! Neil needs quiet to trace the call,” Gwen hissed, ending whatever speech he was about to give. She shoulder-checked past him to usher David closer to the microphone and speak to him in a softer, more awkward voice, “I know it’s a lot of pressure, but we’ll do what we can to get Max back in the meantime. Do you think you’re ready?”

“I don’t know,” he said, honestly. David looked at the screen, “But all of this is my fault. I owe it to Max to try and solve this.”

A flash of conflict crossed Gwen’s face, looking like she wanted to fight him on it. But there wasn’t time for that, so with a sigh, she unmuted their feed.

“...Hello?”

The screen flicked into brightness, casting the room in a whiter glow while Daniel’s pale face took up most of the video feed. Then, he backed up, and the focus settled entirely on the writhing captive tied to the chair behind him.

“Max.” David breathed, making eye contact with the cub through the projection.

Pearly white teeth and a sharp laugh brought him back to Daniel, “Happy you could make it. We had an early riser back there, and we’ve been waiting for you.”

That same warm tone he always used cemented in David's mind that none of it had *ever* been real.

"Why?"

"Do you think I'm going to waste my breath explaining it to simpletons like you?"

From his spot on the chair, Max called something. David could make out his name, and every fibre of his being ached to respond, but whatever it was had Daniel reacting faster than he could.

"Did you hear that? He says that you're better at explaining things anyway," Daniel relayed, "*That* is what I have to deal with," he smiled, all teeth. All violence. "You, brother, are the very antithesis of my existence."

Finally letting out a frustrated growl, Gwen butt into frame, slamming her hands on the control deck, "Bullshit! He hasn't done anything to you! And you're sure as hell not brothers."

"He never had to," Daniel hissed, "His very existence was all it took to make the High Thetans begin preparing me for what I am now. The same genetic sequencing. Same conditions and yet? Look at him!" Daniel gestured sharply at the camera, "He got the colour. The iron. The-" he cracked his neck to the side, demonstratively, "The joints that work like they're supposed to!"

Oh.

So that's how it happened.

David couldn't imagine how belittling that must have felt. A cold channel that caught his boiling anger off guard. In his own transformation, he always felt compared to real humans. Always had to measure up. What Mr Campbell did for him will always matter, but... There were certainly a lot of less fun parts. He hadn't heard a single word about another like him in the stars, but Daniel probably had. And not meeting whatever mark David set? That must have been worse.

"I'm so sorry you went through that, Daniel." If he was being honest, it sounded utterly heartbreaking, but that still never gave Daniel the right to behave how he did. "All of us- We're equals. Anyone who made you think otherwise was wrong..." he took a breath, trying to see Daniel. Really see him through the screen, "You shouldn't feel forced to prove anything to them. To me. It's not too late to bring Max back."

The smile dropped, and David was quickly united with the truth that he'd said something wrong, "Equals? You and me?" a short, bitter laugh, "That's cute, but I'm *better* than you. Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard, my friend. I came out on top in *spite* of my setbacks."

"I didn't-" David rushed, but Daniel cut him off all the same.

“Clearly, since you have that in your head, I *did* have to prove it to you,” he scoffed, gesturing to Max. “I was content advancing through the ranks while you stayed on your little ship, but fate has it that one of those things made it in. I’m sent by Xemuug himself to exterminate Campbell’s little *beast* before it gets any bigger, but it never hurts to enjoy the occupation.”

Things were getting down to the wire. Around him, David could hear the rare sound of movement and hushed whispers that were too quiet to make it to the mic, or his own ears for that matter. It was his job to de-escalate and buy them precious time, but Daniel was so rooted in his beliefs and the command of whoever Xemuug was to listen to him.

The panic was closing in.

“Please, just- I know I’m asking a lot of you,” David prefaced, trying to take steadying breaths, “But you’ve spent time with Max. Doesn’t something in your heart know it wouldn’t be right to take him from us too soon? He’s only-”

Daniel cut off his next forming ramble before it could start, “I already did.”

“*What?*”

“Thirty minutes ago, I fed him a lethal dose of caffeine,” his eyes flicked to Max, cold as ice, “It’s already over, David.”

In that very moment, the entire world seemed to still, tunnel vision narrowing down to just one little form in the display. “No.”

The word came out before he could even think. But he couldn’t. Not when Daniel had uttered something so awful into the universe. For all he knew, the entire ship had been depressurized and David wouldn’t care. He wasn’t breathing anyway. How could he even think when Max was right there? Deathly poisoned, and somewhere he couldn’t get to in time? It was disbelief that tricked into the corners of his lockdown to help him breathe again. Max- Max still *looked* alive. He was breathing.

David refused any other reality.

— — —

How off god’s green earth was he supposed to accurately fake whatever this ‘poison’ was supposed to do to him? He threw in a pained expression here and there, but that wasn’t *dying*. The caffeine high that had been creeping up on him the past handful of minutes was more like an old friend than some laced batch of coke trying to send him into cardiac arrest. Even if they were approaching Panera Bread lemonade levels of saturation, Max only felt energized, and well, a little twitchy. Call him unprepared, but he’d never read a Wikihow to seize. Watching enough horror to know generally what it was supposed to look like, but speaking in

tongues would probably just get him laughed at. Did all aliens even seize the same? Whatever. Daniel wasn't exactly focusing on him anymore, so he had a chance... even if he was about to scar David for life.

He rolled his eyes back manually.

Max vowed to himself that he would only give it one fucking shot to look like a complete idiot. Not even enough time to overthink it, he strained against the ropes again. This time, though, he was trying to pretend it was involuntary. That the convulsions were being pulled from him rather than performed. Max had always been a lacklustre actor, so when he gave up and went limp, he assumed that not even holding his breath would sell it. Any second now, there would be laughter.

Silence.

And then? Gloating so thick he could hear it through the language barrier. That fuck was *happy* to see him dead. Not a hint of remorse or wistfulness or catholic guilt for the sacrifice, just Daniel's incessant need to be better.

Hands undid his first restraint, then the other, and Max was hefted up to be brought closer to the camera. Part of him had been wishing that Daniel would just walk away and call it a job well done, but now he was being manhandled like a fucking catch of the day? Hell fucking no. It was getting harder to play ragdoll each fucking second until.

A choked sound. "...Max."

The amount of devastation David could put into one word broke everything.

Fuck everything about this.

Snapping his eyes open, Max used the dash of buttons and blinking lights in front of him as a springboard, shoving them both over. In his descent, Daniel was forced to pick between getting his hands under him in time or holding on to Max, and he got the shitty end of the stick by letting go *too late*. Max hit the ground hard, but Daniel hit it harder, biting out a choked curse as his head knocked off the ship's metal floor.

When he rose, Daniel was dazed, furious, and above all else— Incredulous. In the rise to get to their feet, he couldn't stop staring. Max interpreted it as suffering from a concussion, because in what world should that have killed him? Why be surprised? Dumbass! Soon, Max registered that he could get an easy hit in on the guy who clearly wasn't all there right now.

"How are you still alive?" Daniel hissed, narrowly avoiding another swipe for his twice injured nose by grabbing him by the offending wrist.

Fuck. Nevermind. Should've just run.

Max writhed, "Because you didn't poison me! That's just coffee!"

"Stop saying that!" Eyes nearly incandescent with rage, Daniel's free hand found Max's *throat*, "What does that word mean to you?"

David's panicked rambling from the other side of the mic became nothing but background noise as thin fingers pressed deeper into his windpipe, "Makes us more alert! I used to eat that shit for breakfast!"

A flare of anger passed in his eyes, and the hand actually loosened, "*Liar*. Actually- you know what? I don't know what went wrong, but I'd like to see you pull that off again."

"Yeah," Max rose to it, trying not to wheeze, "It puts hair on your chest. Have you seriously never drunk any?"

"Of course I've built up a tolerance."

"More than I have?" the edges of Max's mouth barely dared to curl into a smile.

A moment of silence passed as Daniel's eyes searched his, calculations flashing at a million miles per minute. He'd seen Max drink it. They'd waited. He was fine. And that smug attitude was right back there to haunt him. Max had found the one thing Daniel seemed to be *good at* and fucked that up for his weird complex, too. Either Daniel proved he couldn't go drink for drink with someone half his body weight, or they found a way to settle it.

"Fine," he grit his teeth around the word, depositing Max harshly back onto his chair and tying the fastest, angriest boy scout knot he'd ever seen to keep him there.

Oh he was *not* expecting that amount of stalling to work.

The clinking sound of glass preceded the flow of liquid, and he was back again before Max could even try to start picking at the loops. Daniel held two cups. A jug of coffee poured between them.

"You first. I *insist*," Daniel pressed the warm drink into his good hand.

His parents had never approved of him drinking so much of theirs, but never cared enough to stop him either. Maybe negligence prepared him for one thing in all this.

"Gladly."

The first sip was more careful than his last. Just to make sure he hadn't put anything new in it, matching the frankly terrible flavour profile of the first one. But it was the same ass pot of coffee. So, with a mild shrug, Max downed his cup. It was easier the second time, and to his delight, Daniel gave him a look that was frankly disgusted before glancing down at his own.

Obviously, he noticed Max's expectant smirk, and his eye twitched in a clear tell, "You're insufferable," His hand on the cup clenched, "But this was the antidote Xemuug made to cleanse the unworthy from this realm. His will is absolute."

And with that, Daniel tipped the drink back.

His grimace was biblical, but he pressed on. Daniel was obviously convinced he had to match the confidence of the literal child who just called his bluff and finish the rest of it. But that

stuff was strong, and most of the grounds settled to the bottom anyway. Max knew from experience that the aftertaste couldn't even make you feel satisfied to finish.

"Oh look, you're not dead," Max laughed at his suffering, a petty fuck you, "I'll admit I'm disappointed."

Wiping his mouth, he glared back and flicked his eyes to the projection of David, "I know how you feel."

<<What are you doing?>> His tinny sound came from the speakers.

"Tell him that you're deciding if you need to throw up," he snipped, poking fun at Daniel's now almost queasy expression.

But if they were competing? David looked terrible. Really fucking terrible. And that was a little too damning to connect with right now so Max had to focus his attention elsewhere. Like the fact that his captor, incompetent as he might have been, was staring at him and drafting up new ways to kill him on a live fucking video call. His eyes were getting that distant look and everything.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for another cliffhanger. Use your irritation to hex my math prof. Fuck that guy in particular

Chapter 14

David was helpless. A complete and utter feeling.

Each word was foreign, the behaviour made no sense, and for once David knew exactly how Max must've felt when all big decisions happened in a way that could only be interpreted rather than understood. Max was dead. Then he wasn't? And now they were both poisoned in some double suicide pact? Each moment made his heart sink into his stomach more and more.

"What are you doing?" he asked, desperate for anything. He couldn't look away from the screen, much less pay attention to the hushed whispers and vague movements in his periphery from the other crewmates in the room.

There was some bickering from Max, a sharp inhale, and eventually Daniel's eyes connected with his own through the screen, "Pivoting," he grunted, like he was still straining himself to keep the poison down.

It was the one response he'd received in minutes, and it still got him nowhere.

Although his personal goal had been to talk Daniel down, David knew he'd been put there by the others, at best, to buy time. He really, really, *really*, wished that plan A worked, because now every second that passed made him worried that they weren't even paying attention to him anymore. And what then? Terminating the video feed? Making sure that David knew his best efforts couldn't save the cub he'd been tending for months, but never really confirm what happened?

"Maybe it wasn't meant to be?" David said, nervously, "It's the universe— or," sugarcrisps, what was it again? "Zeemu telling you not to do it?"

His grimaced features leaned forward, hands supporting him against the dash as his eyes flashed with dangerous coldness, "Xemuug does not tolerate the impure. He sent me here to—"

"He could have changed his mind! You can ask him right? What if it's not his will anymore?" David knew that whoever it was probably didn't have any say on whether the poison worked or not, but religion was an interpretable subject, right?

Max spoke again. Probably something barbed and witty— just like him, and it looked like it physically pained Daniel to consider the idea that the small cub wasn't destined for the end. Actually... He looked to be in pain in general. Daniel's chest rose and fell in more shallow breathing patterns. Shoulders tense, the hand that appeared to be loosely resting on the opposite wrist was actually... thumbing his own pulse. Oh dear.

"One confirmation message," he picked up a perfectly white comm with a barely visible tremor in his hands, "I'm sure it was only luck."

Bored with picking at his unmoving restraints, Max made an indignant sound, but this time? A line of small white line of text moved across the screen as he spoke:

*'IT'S HARD TO TYPE WHEN YOU'RE ABSOLUTELY ***** ON [UNKNOWN], RIGHT?'*

A translation?

Subtly, he turned his head to glance at the young scientist to his left. Neil was already looking, sending David an affirmative salute before going back to plugging away at the machines. Like it was nothing. Like he and Gwen hadn't scrounged the interweb for every bit of human languaging data they could find. It was almost uncanny now to hear the cub make all his adorable little sounds and have each one of them actually equate to real words.

'I'M DANDY.'

*'NO YOU'RE NOT. I CALL *****.'*

Daniel finally looked at him, hands gripping the comm to keep it from falling from his increasingly shaky hands, *'LANGUAGE.'*

Rearing back as far as the restraint would let him, Max let out a peal of laughter that could only mean bad things, *'DUDE. HOLY ****, YOUR EYES ARE HUGE.'*

The comm was set down, message abandoned so that his free hand could cradle his own head, *'YOU ARE BEING TOO LOUD.'* the text translated his soft mutter, but there were nerves in his tone. And when Daniel glanced back at the camera, clearly mourning his plan, David could see it too. His pupils were blown from the stimulant.

Something was wrong with him.

That poison—it was no joke. Whatever it was doing to Daniel wasn't good. If he looked like he wanted to collapse, what was it doing to Max after a double dose? How was the cub hiding that much exposure behind, well his usual attitude? It wasn't lost on David that Max kept glancing at him. Each time they made eye contact he felt a pang of guilt for being responsible for this. It made him want to ask Neil how far along they were on any plans, but it wasn't worth upsetting Daniel with the knowledge that he was on borrowed time.

But so was Max if they didn't speed this up.

"Hey," speaking felt like it almost couldn't dislodge the emotion in his throat, "Are you hurt? Um, feel bad, Max?"

"Yes," the cub rolled his eyes. That was a stupid question. Of course he felt bad, just— David *needed* to talk to him. The cub seemed just as stumped. *'HOW DO I TELL HIM THAT NOW ALL I NEED IS FOR THE FLIGHT ATTENDANT TO COME BY WITH SNACKS?... DANIEL?'*

"I don't understand what's happening..." Daniel's pinched, hazy expression was clouded with ripe confusion. He turned to the cub, who was still well enough to be poking morbid fun at his own situation, "You... *You* did this to me. You must have."

He was looking at Max, but not speaking in Human. That almost made it worse. He moved past the cub, no doubt on his way to find whatever alternative he sought to ‘pivot’ with. Xemuug’s cryptic will be damned.

And then Max tripped him.

One arm still tied to his seat, the rest of him leaning as far out as he could to extend a singular leg in Daniel’s path, just low enough that he didn’t register it before it was too late. Had the man been in better shape, the action would have accomplished little in the way of stopping him, but it was just enough with the given conditions. Daniel was sent off-balance and fell away from the camera's frame when his feet weren’t able to correct themselves in time. Had Max not been straining from his seat to look down at Daniel, gawking with that pleasantly surprised, but still calculating expression, David might not have been able to place him at all.

Laboured breathing made it through the microphone. A pained groan. The smack of a palm on metal as he searched to pull himself back up, just forward enough for his upper body to make it into frame while still on the floor but...

“Daniel?” He asked, eyes wide.

The man began to convulse. His hands grasped at nothing. His jaw tightened, and his body shook.

“Daniel! Stars—” David didn't know what to do, didn’t know what he could do to help Max. Could they even get him back if the ship’s pilot was incapacitated? “Just- Hold on-” But Daniel was still on the ground and shaking violently. Was Max next? Even if he wasn’t, the cub shouldn’t see this- “I- I-”

No words could change the present.

Maybe it was the fall that sent the poison onto its final, hardest form. Or the effort from trying to push himself back up again. The stress of failing and coming to terms with it. That the miraculous invulnerability to caffeine had *passed him over* and shielded only the young cub he was seeking to kill for his master.

*‘-ERRIBLE. ***** DUDE.’*

Said cub stared with wide eyes, curses dropping from his lips that were hashed out by the translation software, but still definitive in their meaning. And several moments before David could, always before him, Max shook off the inability to look away and immediately redoubled his efforts to pull his hand free from the bind.

*‘YOU KNOW, IF YOU WEREN’T SO ***** UP, THIS WOULD HAVE BEEN A GOOD KNOT. **** YOU, DANIEL.’*

Max had always been aggressive. Mean spirited on days when nothing was wrong. But to see him now, like this? David could finally understand. Each barb on Max’s demeanour wasn’t decorative, or leftover from his home planet. It was applicable. It was now. Max didn’t cry, or scream, or become helpless in the face of danger. He didn’t throw up like David had this

morning. It was like the dial on his personality, and all his emotions, was set to one place and kept him there, anchored in the roughest asteroid fields, even if it meant he was immovable once things were calm.

That space between him and his cub that he couldn't cut down no matter how hard he tried— Was built for here. Now. Moments just like this is what held back all his progress. Made his cub refuse to sleep soundly when another was in the room. Taught him that there was only one person to depend on and it sure as hell wasn't David.

That acknowledgement reached inside his chest and *snapped* something.

"Neil," David broke his eyes away from the screen. "Have you found them yet?"

It didn't matter if Daniel could hear them anymore. He wasn't in a state to react. David had bought them time, and now they had to use it or risk consequences beyond his ability to handle.

Neil met his eyes, surprised and looking slightly ill from the sight that still filled the monitor, "Yes, he's still nearby. With that old ship, Daniel has to stay within range or risk the distance mauling his signal."

"Thank you," Searching the room, David found it... absent. "Where's Gwen?"

"Not far. She's—"

"David!" The hydraulic door opened, but the voice was far too young to belong to Gwen.

A blur of bright green headed straight for him, unmistakably belonging to Nikki— Since when was she on the Campbell? His next move was to catch her somewhere between a hug and a skillful misdirection to shield her eyes from the sight. Behind her, stood his best crew buddy for life, all features pinched after landing on a now only faintly twitching Daniel. Still alive. Mostly.

Why would she bring—

"Look, not *one* of our escape pods are built for pursuit, this ship is as slow as a barge, and I was running out of options," She said, like she could read each thought that skittered through his mind, "You're lucky I know the schedule. Candy's ride is perfect. If we're fast, we can leave before they notice we're gone."

"And Nikki?"

Gwen looked tiredly upon the ball of energy that was currently trying to see the screen past David's hands, "Is the only one who can get us onboard."

There was an undeniable draw to stay where he was. That wasn't to say his feet were rooted to the ground... But the thought of walking away from his closest tie to Max, even if it was to get near him physically, left a torn feeling in his gut. What if something happened and David wasn't there? Couldn't even soothe the cub with the few words he knew? What if Daniel

slipped through their fingers? Or worse, what if Max wasn't with them by the time the ship reached theirs?

But even with all that, he'd proved to be useless. David had to do something.

Gwen's hand found his shoulder, venturing a reassuring squeeze as she pressed a comm tablet into his hands, "I can hear you overthinking, but we have to stay calm. Come on David, you can bring the connection with you."

Swallowing hard, his eyes traced the smaller scene in the hologram in his hands. No less horrific, but stabilising in its existence, "Okay," David nodded sharply, free from his indecision, "Which dock?"

Every muscle in his body screamed to run. To sprint down the halls, push people out of the way, and do anything it took not to waste a single second. Instead, he was stuck with his brisk power walk, keeping to Nikki's heels so that none of the staff guarding the hallways would stop them. If Mr Campbell cared a little more about anything outside of his mothership, or those essential safety qualifications that he'd convinced David so thoroughly were frills in their budget, maybe they could have used one of their own pods.

Two staff, dressed in their cheery yellow, glanced nervously between their small band and Lady Candy's daughter once they finally reached the port where her ship met theirs. Something in him drew taut, anxiety tightening in his gut at the thought of being stopped and wasting more precious time. David didn't have the patience, but neither did Nikki, and she brushed past them to step into the docking canal and to the large ship doors. Gwen kept her head up and did a good job of acting natural as she followed close behind, so he tried to copy that.

"Sorry, but you're not permitted to bring *that* in there."

It was just his luck that they'd put a hand out to stop David anyway.

"She wanted to spend time with the human," Gwen supplied, lowering her ears in a weak attempt at congeniality with a gesture towards Nikki. "We're just grabbing one of her toys."

A suspicious look passed between them, because *yes*, this probably looked bad. The young noble was no stranger to having multiple staff on hand due to how unmanageable she was, but Campbell's human, a scientist, and a hellhound were hardly her usual babysitters. Nikki's open fascination with humans made it not entirely outside the scope of possibility, but...

The moment he saw their hands shift to their comms, clearly looking for more confirmation than just that alone, David tucked the holopad into his pocket and decided he was done waiting for their permission.

"I am so, so, sorry about this, friends," he winced, fingers curling into a fist the same way Max had countless times before.

Their eyes widened in surprise— *he'd spoken*— and that was all he needed.

David's first blow connected with a sharp noise and a cry of pain. Well, two cries of pain because he was not expecting it to hurt that much to hit somebody with his knuckle bones. Having the first attendant go down faster than a cup tower— just like that! made him incredibly torn as he shook out the residual ache in his hand. It wasn't their fault Max was gone, and they were just doing their jobs, but just that action alone had outlet some of the reactor fire inside his chest. He didn't have much time to chicken out once the other reared up in alarm. They had to go, too. Just one more hit.

"Shit!" Gwen sidestepped the second falling body, watching them writhe in pain, "David- I didn't know you could-"

He tried to scrape together some semblance of a smile, "Let's just go."

"This is the first time I've gotten this far. They usually stop me when I try to do this on my own," Nikki whispered, bouncing slightly as the scanner read her wrist. It was clear that she couldn't quite grasp how dire the situation was, but perhaps it was for the best. "This is so badass."

When the door lifted after what felt like centuries, it was clear that Candy favoured a particular shade of fuchsia pink that was striking to the eyes. Thankfully, it was meant for Candy, her daughter, the pilots, and a few staff, so there was plenty of room for all of them. He permitted himself to pick up an anxious pace as Nikki and Neil made their way to the front.

Gwen sent him a concerned look, and David let out a strangled laugh, gripping the tablet in his hands hard before the idea of breaking it forced him to ease up, "Are you two younglings sure that you know how to work this thing?" His voice was thin, partially incredulous that things had come to this, but mostly just scared of everything.

Sitting in a chair that was much too big for her, Nikki pressed a few buttons that made the cabin light up with different diagnostics... which would have been reassuring if she didn't seem so surprised it worked, "Haha! Sure."

"I have the coordinates for the autopilot," Neil hummed, looking lost for a moment before gravitating to a particular interface at the helm. "I'm sure I will have thought of a way to board by the time we're there. Hopefully."

He looked back down at his screen with something between dread and ceaseless guilt. During the time David hadn't been paying attention, Max had freed himself, and was currently in the process of tying Daniel to the chair he was once in. Studying his movements, David could recognize a few of the knots they'd made together during enrichment time, and the knowledge that he could have helped equip Max for surviving the situation ghosted a slight relief over his psyche.

Finally, those sharp eyes went back to David's. They were confused for a few moments, before muttering to himself in human, *'I STILL HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THE **** YOU'RE UP TO OVER THERE.'*

Oh! In the rush of making decisions and the anxiety of walking to the docks without being stopped, David hadn't spoken a word to Max... Heck, the feelings were still making a prickly slurry out of his insides, but now he had hope. A shining beacon to chase until he got back to his cub. "I'm coming to get you, Max," David leaned against one of the ship's walls, feeling the world quake as it disengaged from Campbell's mothership. "Soon. David Max together."

Grunting as he secured the rope, it took a few moments of contemplation before he visibly strung the sentence together in his head. '*WAIT REALLY? ****, I MEAN,*' Max visibly racked his brain, "David understands--"

"Yes," he cradled the holopad close to himself, "Soon."

He would make sure of it. Even when time felt agonizingly slow and space had never felt so vast. What the signal considered in range was farther than he'd anticipated, and the dawning reality of stealing a young noble, her mother's ship, and attacking two people was getting harder and harder to block out. All of it was worth it, and he'd do it again if that's what it took, but David still wondered if he would still be welcomed back home afterward.

"Are the translations running alright?" Neil called to him after David had asked about Max's health seven times in the last seven minutes.

He blinked, looking up to catch his curious glance, "Yes, they're great actually. How did you...?"

"I've been looking for more resources on and off." Neil shrugged, more than a little impressed with himself, but sheepish enough to hide it, "I stumbled upon some of his words in this huge repository by someone only known as '*EarthKidd*' and was training an AI off it a few days before... all this."

Tech saviness was something he only had a beginner's grasp on, but at this point, he was used to being outwitted by people much younger than him and being let down by his elders. Once all this blew over, he was going to make it up to all of his friends, and hopefully get Neil to make something so he and Max could still talk extensively even if he was still learning Common.

"I... I have no words to thank you guys enough," he sighed, trying not to let another round of crying crop up.

"Don't mention it. We're doing it for the little fenspawn, too," Gwen glanced at the screen, "Oh, and heads up, we're almost there."

Instantly, his eyes caught on a pale smudge on the horizon, distinguishable from the stars by the shape of the cruiser. It was gleaming white, as all Daniel's possessions seemed to be, but in terms of shape, the model had clearly aged in terms of recent technology.

Now was the time to think.

That ship contained his cub, but it also contained an unstable individual whom David wanted nowhere near the other kids, or Gwen for that matter. Max wasn't outwardly displaying signs

of poisoning, especially now that he knew what the symptoms looked like on Daniel, but that also bore the possibility that he wasn't truly out of commission. Over the course of the trip, he'd only twitched a few times or made a noise of discomfort, but David wasn't willing to give him a scrap of trust. Not anymore.

Standing as tall as she could, Nikki peered over the helm with an unmistakable excitement. "Oooh, how are we gonna land this puppy? Are we boarding them like space pirates?"

"Good question." Gwen sighed, crossing her arms as their speed reduced to approach the other vessel. "We're not exactly equipped for something like that. Neil?"

"Hell if I know," he looked defeated, "That thing's ancient *and* small— so we can't just breach them, and it's not like anyone onboard would accept the pairing request."

David was already walking towards the back, "Alrighty then. I'll get in first. You three can tell me what to do afterwards." He said, leaving no room for argument.

Gwen's eyes flashed with something pulled tight, but he just shook his head and continued.

Generally, safety standards decreed that all ships above a certain size required escape pods, and personal ships required space suits for an extra layer of options. David was just thankful that he and Candy shared the same anthropomorphic shape as he pulled on the lightweight fabric. He barely paid attention to the weight of the oxygen recycler on his back as he stood in the airlock, only waiting for the telltale pressurizing of the suit. Had he done this before? Only on drills Gwen dragged him out to. It was the same. Sorta. He had his line clipped to him, so he was only a little bit (extremely) terrified, but honestly? David refused to fail right now.

That wasn't just optimism or blind faith talking— It was a personal acknowledgement that he would do whatever it took and then some.

— — —

The machines were beeping. Lights were flashing, things were making noise in that damn alien language he couldn't understand— But Max had eyes. He could *see* the lights of the other ship approaching. The damn thing went completely still beside their own vessel, and it wasn't like Max could figure out what was happening inside it with the limited windshield they had. The low hum of engines doubled, with the second coming from somewhere outside the steel walls.

It was David. He was sure of it. It had to be... but why would he stop out there?

"Daniel!" he smacked the unconscious man bound to the chair, "Please tell me you know what the fuck is happening?"

He stirred slightly, but didn't otherwise react. The screen David had on him was hardly any help right now when it was shaking too much to be discernible.

Near the back of the ship, a klaxon sounded loudly enough to wake the dead. Max hadn't noticed it before, but a small, circular window which had once been dark now shone with slowly pulsing crimson light. Around it was illuminated a seam in the wall, tall enough to be a sealed doorway. Once the blaring noise had gotten tolerable, he tuned in to the heavy, sporadic thumps on the other side.

One glance at the projection screen confirmed— Yes. It was David trying to get in through the airlock.

And fuck. It wasn't opening.

The wall shook with the force of his efforts. Like he somehow expected it to yield with a hard enough shoulder check... but it just wasn't happening without simulated gravity. Everything was so noisy but- wait! he recognized that panel on the wall. It was also blinking— urgently wanting to close the far side of the airlock again no doubt, but it wasn't that different from all the other ones they used.

He glanced at Daniel.

“Don't make me regret untying you.”

Frankly, it was a blow to his pride when he struggled to undo the damn knots he just made, but Max would take it as a show of good craftsmanship on any other day that it wasn't costing him precious seconds. Having little hands was a plus, but his chipped nails kept slipping on the sleek fibres, and Daniel seemed to be waking up from all the noise and jostling. His eyes, though they had been half-lidded occasionally, blinked a few more times than he was comfortable with.

<<Max! No! No, no, no,>> David's voice came through both the screen near the helm and faintly through the door to the airlock, jarring him for a few moments. His image on the feed had stabilized somewhat as the man caught his breath by holding onto a steel handle embedded in the wall. Max didn't know what to do with that kind of expression.

“Just trust me,” he grit out, trying his best to heft one of Daniel's arms over his shoulder to begin the long process of dragging him to the scanner, <<David here soon.>>

There was no quick fix to lifting someone with that much weight on him. The part where he got to shove Daniel back onto the floor was satisfying, but it was uphill from there. God knew that being kept in boxes wasn't great for fitness training. Max had a plenty strong mind, but also stupid weak muscles that burned five steps in. Silver lining: at least he had a truckload of coffee in him to help the process.

A sharp, ragged breath from Daniel was the only warning he received before the man's eyes gained clarity. “Unhand me... impure...”

Gritting his teeth, Max lugged him closer to the door, “Shut up.”

<<Max, that's dangerous!>> David had started up trying to get the door open again, redoubling his efforts now that it was clear Max wouldn't stop.

This really fucking sucked. Maybe he should've found a real knife somewhere and dug the damn access chip right out of Daniel's wrist. He might've even tried it if that fuck fell back under again, but A) just the concept was really fucking gross, and B) bringing Daniel a sharp object right now would do him no favours. The best option he had was trying to get him onto his feet— Or just higher for that matter.

Max stepped on the pristine white shoes Daniel wore, then grabbed his hand again. Only, Max did not weigh as much as the firemen on YouTube and it was *much* harder to pull him into a standing position. He didn't know if it was worse or better that Daniel fucking helped because he was actively trying to rise on his own. It took some staggering, but Daniel was shakily upright for the most part.

“Now's the part where you let me out,” Max hissed, “And maybe, just maybe, someone on Campbell will take you to the sick bay and save your damn life.”

Eyebrows knitting together, Daniel winced with every noisy bash against the door. He slurred something back to him in Alien... but the point seemed to have gotten across. As the man clutched his head and stared down at him with warring deliberation in his eyes, it was clear this would shake down to be double or nothing.

And between the two choices? Max was the winner.

Punching the right button on the airlock controls took him a few tries. Daniel's coordination was all off, but eventually the exterior airlock door hissed shut and the space pressurized until the flashing red hues receded into normal lighting. With it, something in his chest loosened at the fact that David couldn't just go drifting off into space anymore.

“Cool now open the fucking door and let him in already.” Max rushed. He very well would've elbowed Daniel if it weren't for the fact that it looked like he was barely standing as it was.

Daniel sent him one withering glare, stood up a little straighter— and finally, fucking finally-

“Max!”

— — —

The outermost part of the ship had an emergency manual lever for the airlock, but his progress stopped there.

Of course David knew he couldn't get all the way inside by himself. Well, now he did anyway. Did he feel stupid? Yes! Yes he did! But that was *not* helpful and he could better use

his energy causing a ruckus. He wouldn't be ignored. Breaching the ship and sucking all the air out into space was counterproductive to his cause, but he just had to come close enough that Daniel would rather let him in than risk it. He was panicking, alright? There weren't a lot of good plans right now.

Rearing back to strike again, David froze when he felt the pull of artificial gravity bear down on the airlock all at once. The lock behind him shut, nearly causing him to lose his balance from the sheer vibration alone. That, and the ill-fitting boots of the spacesuit. While he was recovering, his stillness granted him a clear view of what was happening inside, and just seeing Daniel's face in person had him pounding at the door again.

Distantly, he knew his joints would ache from the abuse. He didn't really mind.

He heard the mechanism of the interior door working before he saw it, but within a handful of frenzied heartbeats, nothing was separating them anymore, "Max!"

Opening his arms wide was his first instinct. There were so many impulses firing into that one single moment, combining messily into the need to usher him away from Daniel. To squeeze him tight after far too many close calls of losing him for good. It was supposed to be an apology, an oath of protection, or at the very least a source of comfort.

Max took a step forward, and Daniel-

Daniel kicked him. Daniel kicked his cub so that they were both in the airlock.

"Shit!"

The curse was bitten from his lips before Max even landed in his arms. Torn from him without filter because he didn't even have to see the dark look in Daniel's eyes to know what came next. His hand was still on the controls.

No, no, no, no-

Once again, he heard the door's mechanisms before he saw it. There was no thinking with panic that cold. David stuck his arm out through the threshold just as it was closing.

Pain erupted through his forearm. Metal meeting the sleeve of his suit and impacting the skin beneath it. For one twisted second, he could only hold Max close to him with his good hand and square with the fact that after all this— He failed.

But the sliding metal retreated— A rejection of the incomplete seal.

Oh.

Oh!

His surprise reflected in Daniel's features, chased away by a sea of outrage.

But David was faster.

Pulling Max out of the airlock with him was pure instinct. Nerves. Fear. *Action*.

So when he had Max safely on the other side and David finally got to stare down at the man he'd once hoped would be a friend to him like no other— He was struck with a much different emotion.

David lunged.

Never once in his life had he been engulfed by something so sharp and bitter. David hadn't known he was even *capable* of it until the burning flames of it crawled up his chest and buried the empathy in him like thick soot filling soft lungs. After all his chances- Daniel still almost- *Fuck*. There was too much of it. Too much raw understanding that one man was at fault for it all. David was shaking with the weight of a burst dam.

His eyes watered, "*You.*"

The first impact of his one good fist on Daniel's cheekbone felt far less final than when he'd struck Nikki's guards. The pain. The sound. Even Daniel's bewildered stagger and dizzy eyes did nothing for him.

Head hung at an odd angle, Daniel cradled his jaw, "Finally... grew a spine?" he panted.

Just hearing him talk- Oh gods. David was going to kill him. "You have no idea."

Worse still, he could tell that Daniel was still thinking. Still weighing his options against David and his injured arm. As someone who knew full well he could be outwitted- tricked- have the rug pulled out from under him- Just the look sent a wave of urgency through his body. David had to do this now and he had to do this *brutally*. Who knows what could slip through otherwise? He *hated* not being secure enough against it.

"*Don't,*" was his low, final warning when Daniel's cold blue eyes had the audacity to glance at Max. At his *cub*.

But of course he went and did it anyway. Feigning towards the earthling, Daniel lurched in Max's direction before abruptly moving for the ship's helm. It made David want to scream, but the noise was more accurately caught between a sob and a grunt when he tackled him. From there, it was between clawing hands and kicking legs that he had to fight his way to get things back under control. Any scrap of purchase was used. Dug into. His helmet was thrown somewhere— Daniel's doing. Then his gloves— David needed better purchase. Neither of them could get to their feet, so he settled for clambering on top of Daniel instead.

David hit him in the face again.

It hurt. Pain bloomed up his whole hand, and flecks of blood hit the floor where Daniel's lip forced out more of that purple from the impact. But it wasn't enough. The cacophony in David's mind needed more than that to protect his cub.

So he did it again.

Daniel coughed, a generous trail of violet now leaking from his split lip in two places, “Of course it would end like this,” he scoffed, “You’ve always been fate’s favourite. Compared to me, you practically bleed dumb, undeserving luck.”

“Please shut up,” he hissed, breath ragged and wet as his head hung above the traitor. “You don’t think I know how close you were to taking everything?” A choppy laugh, “I will *never* forget.”

David hit him again. Maybe three times, give or take. It was the only thing that worked. Each impact felt doubled with how Daniel’s head hit the floor. Each crack sounded satisfying, and the racing pain in his hands was the only thing to bring him a second of euphoric clarity before it rushed back in again for another hit. That seemed to be the round to finally shove Daniel into unconsciousness, and his fist was still raised for another strike when a voice cut through the static in his head.

“David.”

His cub.

Max wore a complicated expression. Not afraid... but concerned. His face was firm set, but the bags under his eyes and tilt of his posture spoke volumes. Some middle ground between mentally wired and physically exhausted. Pushed past his limit more than anything. A rough handful of hours wasn’t helping him and it was clear he’d never seen David like this. Neither of them had.

The cub, brave as he was, took another step towards them.

“I’m so sorry,” David croaked, the first real words he’d spoken *to* Max since breaching the ship, “I- I should have been better and-” And even if he spoke Human, he’d never find enough words, “Max, I promise I’ll never let anyone ever hurt you again. I swear it- No matter what I have to do-”

But could he keep it? After everything that’s happened? What if-

“Thank you.”

All thoughts left his mind the moment Max wrapped his small arms around him. With how he was currently straddling Daniel, the angle was awkward, but they were at least somewhat eye-to-eye. Enough so that even with his arms trapped to his sides, David could hook his chin over Max’s shoulder, letting out a choked sound he didn’t even know he was holding in. The void of space had never been so quiet, but Max’s subtle breathing helped. He had no idea how the cub could do it so easily when the whole place reeked of poison, but David found himself unconsciously trying to match it anyway.

He couldn’t say how long they stayed like that. Even without the adrenaline crash, time stood still in the wake of Max actively choosing him. Even as the aches and pains of his body began to creep in, David didn’t dare move a muscle until the cub pulled away first. Even then, he was still blinking back a few tears.

When his vision cleared, Max was holding the previously dropped holopad: It was ringing with an incoming call from Gwen.

Oh.

After sending another glance to Daniel just to make sure he was still barely breathing, he made a reach for the answering button. “Sorry about that, kiddo. Um-” The knuckles in his hand shot pain into his nerves when he uncurled his fist to extend his fingers, drawing a winced sound from him.

Cracked, then.

He must’ve looked a little lost for what to do when Max drew back, shaking his head, “No.” the cub supplied, eyebrows knitting together as small fingers worked to take the call on his own.

“--Answer me or I swear to the moon that I am going to kill you myse-” Gwen’s voice cut through the speaker, “Max!”

“Gwen!” he shouted at the hologram, glancing once at David before looking back to the screen with a stressed expression, “Come here.”

“Yeah, kid, we want to. Where’s David?”

Max reversed his hold on the device, extending it screen first in David’s general direction instead of swapping cameras. At the very least, it showed him the exact moment when Gwen’s face dropped.

“Oh- *shit*,” her entire demeanour changed in an instant. “Are you okay? Tell me what happened! When you didn’t pick up, I thought-”

“Is that guy dead?” Nikki asked, face obscuring the camera.

Glancing back down, David was finally able to clue in that— Okay. Daniel wasn’t dead, but he wouldn’t be going anywhere anytime soon— for sure this time. And not in a way that was easy to fake. That amount of blood, coupled with how some things had already started turning colour- Best not to think about it. There were some good doctors in the galaxy. He glanced back at Max, feeling awareness in his body slowly begin to seep back into focus.

Actually, the kids probably shouldn’t be seeing this either. Did David really do that much of a number on him? All of that? Yeesh.

“Alrighty,” he coughed, shakily getting up, “Can someone walk me through how to dock this thing?”

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

EVERYONE STOP AND LOOK AT WHAT [WitheredForgetMeNot DREW](#)
ASDFGHJKL;

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

No one helped Daniel.

It was as though they'd formed a silent, unanimous agreement that any chance of pulling through his injuries was between him and Xemuug. And that chance was looking pretty slim by the time they left. When David and Max crossed over from the pungent smelling spacecraft to greet the others, no one was allowed to go back in. Not for Neil's coldly scientific analysis or Nikki's morbid curiosity. Even though everything that transpired left behind a wake of evidence: The poison cooling in its bowl, the blood on the floor, and the body inside, they were all abandoned in their gruesome scene. Space was a pretty big place. The chances of someone finding the ship were slim.

They had Max. That was all they needed.

"Are you sure you don't want me to, like, brick his ship with a brontobyte of compressed files?" Neil asked, staring through the porthole as the docking arm retracted.

Gwen looked like she was genuinely considering the idea, "Maybe. But I don't want to stay out here long enough to upload it." She looked at David, who had collapsed into one of the seats with an unusually tolerant Max in his lap, "We need to get everyone home."

He tried to muster up a half smile back at them for their antics, but she was right. David was exhausted. The adrenaline crash, coupled with the painkillers he'd been given until they got back to the Campbell was not helping. If anything, the small amount of time it took to disengage seemed to span hours, and with the pain in his hands, he couldn't even hold onto his cub when the engines started up. Max seemed to be in a similar enough state, with his whole body leaning against David, but his hands picking at the frayed edges of his sleeves. Still wired. Still *drugged*. David just rested his chin on the cub's soft curls and let the scent of something other than iron comfort him.

"Well, I think you should give *me* the ship if he's really dead," Nikki huffed, "Just look what that guy did to Max. Why does he get to keep it?"

"Ask your mom." Gwen countered. Not a no.

Speaking of...

The consequences of kidnapping young nobility, grand theft auto, and two counts of assault were less easy to leave behind.

Or so you'd think.

"Nickolette! What did I tell you about runnin' off?" Lady Candy was already waiting for them in the docking bay, face pinched in irritation. She didn't even spare the rest of them a glance.

Nikki ran over to her mother, staring upwards at her with sheer determination on her face, "We had to save Max! He was taken by David's evil twin!"

"Seriously? You took Mr. Campbell's critters with you?"

"He won!"

"What he did was pop two of our attendants." She muttered, "Come on. Back on the ship. We're late."

Part of him couldn't quite settle into the fact that it was *over* over. That the small cub he hadn't once let stray from himself was truly Max: Alive and breathing despite everything... But he'd be damned if anyone could come along and try to take him from him. The cub had only tried once to pull away in the presence of the others, but even then it was a half-hearted tug at best. Max seemed to settle down when he realized that David wasn't above aggravating his own injuries to hold on to him. He didn't know if he could truly let Max out of arm's reach anymore. It was like David had discovered his beating heart was vulnerably outside of his body and in the shape of a small cub who depended on him.

Gwen moved into his vision, an anchor to the spiral, "We should get both of you to the infirmary, David."

"Right." If not for himself, then Max and his double dose of poison.

He realized that despite his agreement, David's feet hadn't gone anywhere, but a tentative step forward from Neil prompted him to start.

"How did you even use this-" Neil sputtered at the image on his screen, "Your left arm is bruised purple, and almost all your knuckles in *both* your hands are fractured."

Max, sat beside him on the examination table, scowling down at the tiny stitches in his hand. Thankfully, all his vitals were healthy, and he'd already metabolized most of the Caffeine by the time they brought him in. As a precaution, neither of them were allowed to do any strenuous activity for a while, but it was going to be alright.

"Can you fix it?" he asked, hopefully.

"You do know that I'm a scientist, right?" he asked, "Medicine and science have an overlapping ven-diagram but I don't know how you expect me to do everything that vaguely requires it!"

While Gwen wasn't a doctor either, she'd done a good job of finding out safe pain medications and a plan of action for it. "So you're saying you can't?" She looked at Neil imploringly.

...But that wasn't the only kind of intelligence she possessed. Some level of finesse made it in there, too.

Neil's eyes strayed to the infirmary he currently had to himself— A room full of technology and people who believed in his competence, "Of course I Can do it. What could it take- A few stem cells and a cast? Just let me work."

— — —

You know, after watching David go apeshit and beat the crap out of Daniel, most of him had expected that he wouldn't stay weird and twitchy forever.

When it was finally time to get back in his cell (something he never thought he'd say he missed), David made no move to leave. Max had mostly been waiting until people were gone before his brain could actually have the nervous breakdown that it wanted, so his lingering made that difficult. David, in all his bandaged glory, seemed fond of keeping Max at his hip. He had to stare straight up at the man.

"Well?" he huffed, trying not to wince at the feeling of his suture shifting when he crossed his arms. <<Goodnight, David.>>

And if he leaned into the gentle knock of David's bandaged hand placed on his shoulder, it was for *his* peace of mind. Got it? That sap would probably still be petting him if they hadn't just sat down for the agonizing ordeal of setting *every knuckle in that hand*.

Kneeling, David got down to his level, eyes big, "Max. "

Oh. The sad voice again. Usually, he'd instantly recoil at all of these bleeding emotions, but tonight things were uncomfortably close to the surface. His traitorous overtaxed system responded by tightening something in his throat. It urged that maybe what happened really was shitty. Maybe now was the time to cry about it.

"Yeah?"

Oh god, David must've heard something in his voice. <<I'm so sorry, Max.>> He'd apologized at least a million times since getting back on the ship, and each time it was infuriatingly hard to stay mad.

<<I know,>> Max sighed, "But you fixed it, alright?" It was hard to verbalize, <<I'm okay. Thank you.>>

Regardless, he stood sentry while Max got himself ready for bed. The process took no longer than flopping down into the assortment of blankets and letting out a bone deep sigh, but that was all he could manage right now. The lights could stay on... He just needed few more minutes of emotional repression while facing the wall. Who wouldn't? He wasn't sure if David had died that time in the hallway, or if he was toast when Daniel fed him that crap, or even how he managed to not get spaced before David stuck his fucking arm out of the airlock!

Speaking of...

He turned back to David, who hadn't budged, <<What?>>

A tired smile. <<Goodnight Max.>>

<<You staying here?>>

<<Yes.>>

"But-" Max made a frustrated sound.

David had a bleeding heart, but this was going too far. Between the two of them, it was David who suffered worse injuries. He needed sleep, or a stiff drink, or something! The knowledge that no one had stopped Daniel from getting in last night was rough— don't get him wrong, Max would not be having a *good* sleep by any means. Realistically, on the off chance he didn't die of a traumatic brain injury, Daniel would probably have trouble counting to ten, much less being able to pull something like that right now. Max had to get over himself.

The soft chuckle he got in response rang like the conversation was ending.

<<No,>> he sat up, dragging a hand down his face.

Even as he was doing it, he knew that this would be the inch that David could walk a mile with. It didn't matter. They needed to sleep. God knows David had given him enough blankets to share a few. It's not like he was offering up his cot, just... a makeshift setup on the floor for tonight. He told himself it wouldn't take longer than that to get things back to normal.

<<What are you doing?>> David asked, voice small. Like it wasn't fucking obvious by the time he threw down a pillow.

<<Sleep.>> he huffed, pointing to it with demonstrative slowness to treat him like a child.

Within the second, he found himself swept up in a tight hug from the mess that was his guardian. He didn't know why David was suddenly so certain he wouldn't get kicked in the nuts for even attempting it, but Max begrudgingly let him without any retaliation. It's not like he needed to be coddled, but Max found he didn't hate the way David was so willing to prove that he gave a shit all the time. Sue him. The change of pace felt nice.

And maybe, just maybe, those arms felt like they were the only thing keeping Max's splintered trainwreck of a nervous system together.

It was easier to knock out with a second heartbeat so close.

— — —

In the following weeks, David got hard. Wait— Not like that.

He got real.

Sometimes all it took to reassess your values was a near death experience and the eensy weensy psychological break that came from it— Which he was recovering from quite well! His hands were healing, the blood vessels in his arm had stopped bleeding internally, and Max was complaining less about spending every hour of every day and night in David's direct presence. The last one was hardly a big change, but his skittering thoughts insisted it was a good one. David *needed* that assurance right now and also all the time for the foreseeable future.

“Eat some more, bud,” he nudged the cub beside him at the table.

They'd taken to dining in the staff room together. The change of scenery was nice, and Max actually got to see and choose his own food from what was on hand. Maybe one day they'd go to the communal mess hall, but that was a later battle. It wasn't his fear of upsetting Mr Campbell that held him back anymore, just the quiet selfishness of keeping Max away from others until things had levelled out.

“I want caffeine,” Max remarked bluntly, stabbing into his cut of mystery meat.

David fixed him with a hard look, “That's not funny.”

“Good.”

They had more words between them now at least, but he still wished he had caught the sarcastic mutter Max made afterward. Neil's latest invention was going to be a device that gave them live subtitles for *both* of them to read (thank the stars Max was literate). Neil had made time in his schedule almost every day so the software could work both ways for them... which mostly consisted of Neil making a phonetic sound and Max handing him back a shape or two on paper, then developing into Max spelling out whole words in Human- or more accurately: ‘Ing-Glush’.

His com pinged, making him glance down slightly, “Gwen says she's made some space for us today...” And by making space, she meant cancelling with all of Campbell's clients on his behalf, only to turn around and lie to him about their availability with that same frank attitude she always wore. “Ready to see the lab?”

Maybe they all learned to stand up for themselves a little more after the incident.

“Soon.”

As it turned out, the cub was more than willing to put away the dishes into the cleaning receptacle if it meant having something to do. Being out and about more often came with all sorts of little tasks that Max was picking up like second nature. He led them through the ship without a single confused glance, walking fast enough that David could pick up a comfortable stride to supplement all those tiny steps. The most David got was an expectant glare to open the door for him once they finally got there.

“Look who it is!” Neil called, tapping something into his tablet while practically glowing with pride, “Gwen helped with most of the boring stuff, but *I* handled the computer science.”

The aforementioned Gwen sat in a chair, surrounded by screens of text, “I did not get a degree in Language Arts for you to say that,” She glared, “It’s technically a science.”

“No it isn’t.”

Taking his place at the only clear table, David resisted the urge to scoop them both up in a hug, “Well, I’m just happy to hear you two were working as a team!”

After Max had sat down, Neil placed a holopad down for each of them. The screens were deceptively blank, and David was about to ask why when the cub beat him to it.

With all your fancy shit, I would have expected you guys to have Google Translate ages ago.

A small hush took over the room.

“What’s that?” Neil asked, sounding slightly offended. “These are cutting edge technologies the galaxy has never seen!”

Max visibly paused as the text blinked onto the screen, ***Fuck. Hold on. It’s been a while since I had to read this much.***

“Language.” David already knew that one was bad without the software filling him in.

But the way Max glanced at the word, then at David— And he knew that it had been *understood* in the cub’s mother tongue. Oh, there was so, so much he needed to say.

“Hi kiddo...” David said, a little lost for words. When he had so many questions to ask, they all got caught in his throat trying to come out at once, “My name is David. My favourite colour is green, and I like to sing songs.”

A reintroduction.

The cub snorted. ***I knew that much... Fine. My name is Max. Blue is alright, and I own this fucking ship.***

Nodding, Gwen's canine teeth became something of a smile, "Not wrong. He's sure got *us* wrapped around his fingers."

Thanks for noticing.

"When Nikki said you were snarky, I had a hard time believing this is what she meant." Neil admitted, glancing at the scrawling line of text and the cub's smug expression, "Did you know that she's significantly grown the revenue of this ship by forcing her mother to come back here so often?"

This place was already a daycare. Max shrugged, then turned to David, ***With you around, I'm surprised it hadn't happened sooner.***

Now that was an Idea. A good one, for sure. But it could be placed on the back burner for now. After all, Max's 'snark' as Neil had put it, was probably going to change some of his answers so long as there were other people around. Maybe David wasn't always the best at reading between the lines. Anyone could tell you that. And he nearly missed it: There was just something about the way the cub simmered with satisfaction at Gwen's approving chuff that clued him in that Max still had a front to maintain around his friends.

"Could we maybe...?" he turned to her, glancing between the two of them. "I just have a few things to ask."

And like the understanding person she was, Gwen nodded. She didn't need more explanation, though David hoped to fill her in later. Even if they didn't have identical outlooks, or even levels of enthusiasm, her friendship still showed itself in subtle ways that meant a lot to him.

"What!" Neil squawked, "This is my technology!"

"And we missed lunch. We'll be back soon enough," She said, giving him a firm look until he relented and followed her out.

The door closed, and when he glanced back at the cub, David found there were already eyes on him, ***Well? What is it?***

"Do you... Like it here?" David asked, softly. His end of the question was simple, but he knew in his heart of hearts that Max would need a little more options to articulate himself if he was going to have any hope of getting it answered.

I... Max trailed off, the pronoun sitting on the screen untethered to any other word. ***It's complicated.***

Something in him was selfishly crushed. Maybe he should have counted Max's comfort near him as a victory and left it at that. It would be cruel of him to expect the cub to love a place that mistreated him so much. That left him disconnected and vulner-

Hey.

He moved his eyes back to Max's face: An exasperated wash of emotions that grew unreadable as they muddled into each other. At the very least, all of it was focused.

God, David. I can feel you thinking too much. I'm not- I don't feel like going anywhere else right now. Your ship is fine. He crossed his arms, looking away again the moment David

was done reading and went to search his face, *Earth is what I grew up with, but it was pretty shitty to me too, and-* A barely contained wince, *You're not on it. So whatever.*

Oh.

Max *wanted* to be near *him*. More than going home.

That- Oh. Oh wow.

You're crying? Jesus- Just- Don't make a big deal out of it.

He was. The words in his vision were smudged at the edges, glowing with the gift they brought him. David would never love or take care of anyone for the sake of a return. He'd never really thought about how all the attention he poured into Max at every opportunity felt like a way he could pay back what had been stolen from the cub at such a young age. Maybe it was an apology. Somewhere in him, David felt like Max could have all he needed and more if they were simply good enough people to put him back on Earth forever.

But Max chose *him*.

"It's a big deal! This is the biggest deal!" he sniffled, already finding himself pulling Max closer to him. Who needed two chairs? This was his cub- his cub who cared-

"Davidddd," he groaned, but didn't otherwise squirm. Only adjusting himself to get comfortable in the hold.

Already, being able to give Max a squeeze helped ebb the monsoon of unreasonable joy flooding him, "I'm sorry. You probably have your own things you wonder about."

Yeah. No shit. he trailed off, then seized it, *Daniel said a lot of things. Are you like, actually human or?*

Advanced camouflage, shapeshifting, skinwalking, the terms only got more offensive from there. Whatever someone wanted to call it, David's species evolved to really blend in long-term and quietly assimilate into the dominant species to survive. Now, that little trick came with the caveat that it could only be done with other sapiens from his planet that were similar enough in genes that his own body didn't have to do a crazy amount of heavy lifting to change his exterior.

"No," David felt hit square in the chest. "I'm sorry."

I wanted to assume that you were just raised out here. Max admitted, a little quieter. A little more hurt, *But... you're like him, then?*

Something like them could only be born in a lab like this one.

This exterior was an investment. It was an intentional and, from what he's been repetitively told, very *expensive* partial-swap from one genome to another. And for that David was grateful, even if it hurt a lot and took a while. Mr Campbell brought him in when he was still juvenile and malleable and insisted he not waste time in deciding to become unrecognizable

to the galactic regulatory counsel. Otherwise? It would be straight back to his home planet. His species wasn't very trusted around there either, so donning the appearance of a human was a simpler option with more opportunity. One that Mr Campbell had graciously offered him.

"Well, I *was* raised out here..." That half of the admission was easier. The ship was mostly what he knew after the faded memories of his old planet... His hug tightened, if only a little, "Max, Kiddo, we might be the same thing, but I can promise you I'm *nothing* like him."

Miraculously, the comfort seemed to work, and Max's lips quirked up just the tiniest bit before he could remember himself with a small embarrassed face, ***Whatever. Both of you were eerily similar the whole time. You just seem to mean all that dumb stuff you say for real... Or well, do, action-wise. It's kind of weird to be talking together like this.***

Something in him panged to be reminded at how easily Max could read the situation ages before he could. And yeah, David would be lying if he wasn't entirely convinced that he'd found a kindred spirit when Daniel showed up. It was a hard conversation, but an important one, he reasoned. There were plenty of things they would do well to talk about while restructuring their lives.

"I'm... Still sorry you can't go back," David said, cracking open a box he wished he could hold shut with his bare hands alone— But Max didn't deserve that. "You *weren't* raised here... You probably spent a lot of time on Earth... Do you want to tell me about it?"

There was a moment of silence where he knew he'd played the wrong chord. The memories his cub was sifting through visibly stung and there was nothing David felt like he could do to stop it. Just be there for him now and hold space for it when it got heavy. The past had happened, pushing bad things off into time, but also creating distance between them and a previous childhood that Max had every right to mourn.

Humanity has some pretty okay things going for it, but a lot of it winds up disappointing and turns into a crapshoot for anything caught in the crossfire, he said, a little too matter of fact for David's heart. ***There are billions of us, and out of all the parents I could've had... Mine just... Didn't give a shit about me.***

Then and there, hearing the past spill out of a child he'd once been fool enough to not even think was sapient, did he truly start to know the broader picture that was Max. Not just from how he acted, but a *history* of who he was. There was so much David had yet to understand. And even past that, there was a whole planet of Max's life that was still out there. While he could never know for certain what the future held, David knew he wanted to be there beside Max. He looked forward to showing his cub the beauty of the broader galaxy, and to keep learning in turn. If that meant convincing Campbell to break universal law and infiltrate a hellish deathworld, so be it.

Softly, giving him room to stop, David gently probed, "What happened after that?"

Max looked contemplative, gathering together his thoughts as he took a breath... And then he started talking: ***When I first ran away from home, I expected to get at least somewhat far...***

Chapter End Notes

The end! This fic was such an undertaking to make, and I know there are still a few cracks in it plot-wise, but that's just space for headcanons. Big kudos to anyone who stuck around or is just reading this at some point in the future. All of you were so nice to me. <3 <3 <3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!